

READING THE SCRIPT

I have come to realize that most of you are not accustomed to reading scripts. It is even possible that some of you have *written* more scripts than you've read. If the latter is the case, it might suggest that you are more practiced at studying whether or not your own intentions are captured on the page, than on discerning and unpacking someone else's intentions and achievements. That's the challenge we are taking on in this course.

If you are going to successfully interpret and render a screenplay that has real merit, you must learn how to approach the reading of the script.

When I was a college sophomore I had the good fortune of assisting director, Alan Schneider, on the original production of Albee's *A Delicate Balance* on Broadway. Sometime during the course of a month's worth of rehearsals, during which we heard actors playing the scenes and reciting the lines over and over for seven hours a day, Schneider mentioned to me that before coming to work his practice was to re-read the entire play to himself every single day. I was astounded. By this point in the process the play seemed so familiar – overfamiliar even to me -that I could not imagine the point of such close study. Yet the man who was giving me this advice was the premiere American interpreter of the plays of Edward Albee, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. He had enjoyed enormous success in bringing difficult, even baffling texts to life. Perhaps, I thought, I should pay attention.

I have never gotten to the point where I re-read a script every single day. I do, however, read the script multiple times in the course of production, and I urge you to do so as well. What follows are some tips on how to approach this:

FIRST SESSION

1. **Print out the script**...you are going to want to have a hard copy for your notes. Also, reading a physical script will help you enter the writer's world, free from the distractions that pop up on a computer screen.
2. **Read the script straight through** in one sitting. Do not take notes. As much as possible allow the story to speak to you unmediated by critical thinking. Let it wash over you, try to lose yourself in it, let it play on the screen of your mind and speak to your inner ear.
3. **Pick up a Pencil.** Notice I said pencil. With an eraser. Old school. Capture your very first impressions before they fade away. There'll never be another first time. You'll never be a story virgin again. Quickly jot some notes on the blank back page - a few of the things that stand out to you from the reading. Don't worry about sounding smart. Don't worry about writing in full

grammatical sentences. These are your private notes for your eyes only. You will be surprised, at a later date, when you are too deep into the work to be able to see the forest for the trees, you will discover some jotting on this first impressions page that will help you get back on track.

4. **Read the Script a Second Time with Pencil in Hand.** On this second reading I use the pencil to circle things that catch my eye, and I scribble quick notes in the margins. Some things will strike me as having particular importance. Other things may have seemed confusing on the first reading and still confuse me second time. Still other things I will now see as part of a pattern. Once again, these are not deep, analytical, essay-type notations – they are markers to keeping track of things that stand out to me at the moment.
5. **Gestate.** That’s enough for now. Put the script aside and let it percolate.

SECOND SESSION

1. **Read the Script a Third Time.** This and all future readings should be done with pencil in hand. Perhaps a word or reference was unfamiliar to you and, on the second reading, you put a “?” next to it. Now would be a good time to look it up. Make a note of meaning or pronunciation, and erase the question mark. On this reading more patterns may emerge – make note of them. Perhaps some associations to your personal life occur to you...perhaps some setting or staging ideas or challenges spring to mind. You are beginning to think of actors to play the parts – either real world casting ideas or “dream casting” that but might suggest how you are imagining the character. If you write: “Scarlett Johansson” next to a character, also note what qualities you are associating with that name. With each reading you will notice at least one new thing in the script that you had previously missed. You are sure to note more than one “problem” you will want to solve. An associative, non-linear web of ideas is beginning to emerge, and your pencil scribbles are forming a record.

THE SCENE

1. **Print out your Scene.** With a clean, un-marked, hard copy of your scene in hand, follow the process we used on the screenplay. Read it without making notations. It’s short. It’s only three or four pages, so read it three or four times this way.
2. **Read it Aloud.** Read it aloud. Do this alone the first time. See how it feels to speak the text. It doesn’t matter if you’re not an actor – give yourself the experience of hearing yourself say the words. Feel what it’s like to say words that you did not compose.
3. **Read it Aloud with Someone.** Get a friend to read it with you. Switch parts. Look at the world from the other side.

4. **Pick up your Pencil.** Read it over several times making marginal notes. Some of these may recapitulate your screenplay notes, but now your notes may start to highlight the physical requirements of the scene. Where does it take place? How is the space arranged? Where do the characters want to be? These are the very practical questions you want to begin asking every time you read the scene. It's not the answers that matter here – it's recognizing and writing down the important questions that we are after.

FOURTH READING

1. **Read the Script a Fourth Time.** Now that you are more intimately familiar with your scene, read the whole screenplay again. Pay close attention to everything that precedes your scene that has specific bearing on it, and think about what has to happen in your scene that will move the characters into what follows.

SCENE ANALYSIS BREAKDOWN

1. **Do your Scene Analysis Questions.** The instructions for these will be given in class and supported by handout materials. Work in pencil. Revise your answers several times prior to your meeting
2. **Mark your Beats.** Print out a clean copy of the scene and - in pencil - draw a line where you think a beat change may occur. Do not make any other notes on this copy...just the pencil lines indicating the beats.
3. **Attend your Scene Analysis Meeting.**

FIFTH READING

1. **Read the Script a Fifth Time.** This time pay particular attention to all the Circumstances that are active in your scene. As you go through the script make note of all the Governing Social Obligations that are alive in each scene. Name the Occasion for each scene.

SUBSEQUENT READINGS

1. After your First Rehearsal
2. After your First In-Class Rehearsal
3. After your Next Rehearsal
4. After your Second in-Class Rehearsal
5. Before Planning your Shoot or Third In-Class Rehearsal
6. After Your Shoot and Before your Edit

Writers often break up their script revisions into “passes.” Rather than burden themselves with the responsibility of solving all the challenges each time they face

the page, they will choose one aspect and focus on it as they rewrite. They will talk about doing a “Character Pass”, or a “Dialogue Pass”, a “Story Pass”, an “Action Pass” or a “Joke Pass”. You might want to try a similar approach. Dedicate one reading to imagining the physical environment, the *mise en scene*, the spaces, entrances and exits, the furniture. In another read focus on Moments and Beats. In another the Circumstances etc. etc.. The process is like peeling an onion. As each layer is pulled back another is revealed. You’ve never seen that new layer before – it’s a fresh opportunity to discover something about the script that was previously concealed. If you peel back one layer and there’s nothing underneath, I would suggest that you are cooking with a undernourished onion that’s not worth your effort. The scripts that we are working with in class are definitely multi-layered. Learn to read the layers and your efforts will be rewarded.

WHAT DOES YOUR SCRIPT LOOK LIKE?

At this point your script may be getting messy and cluttered with notes. If you are like me this won’t bother you. I don’t read and refer to the notes in my script while I’m directing. There isn’t time. I find that the simply act of writing the note cements the thought in my mind. In the midst of interacting with actors, or while working with a DP, my brain seems to retrieve what is most important at the moment. I do, however, appreciate seeing my notes as I reread the script off set. That is the time I like to be reminded of things that once occurred to me but I wasn’t ready to assimilate. Now those very things might be the key to a problem I am currently addressing.

But that’s me; you may be different. You may want to review your notes in a less random manner. Perhaps you could start with a fresh script and reenter the notes in a more orderly fashion. Maybe use different colored pencils for different types of notes – one color for Occasions, another for Obligations, another for Verbs, another for Doings another for Staging or Behavior ideas. Maybe you want a special color or style of notation to indicate Moments and Beats, and another to identify Joke Areas or Comic Opportunities. This is very personal and you will want to explore and find what works best for you.

However you do it....JUST KEEP READING

Barnet Kellman