

Staging Your Play

by Elizabeth London

Essential Question

How does staging make the story of our play clear for the audience?

Ideal group

Intermediate. Middle/High School.

Goal/Aim

Students will learn about the process of blocking a scene for the stage. They will learn blocking and staging techniques, apply them to rehearsal on their feet and learn how to notate that blocking in their scripts.

Length of Lesson

One class period, 40-60 minutes for the basic lesson through sharing tableaux. Working sessions and blocking rehearsals can be extended, 40-75 minutes or more, depending on time available.

Materials Needed

Any chairs, stage-blocks or tables, which may be used as set pieces, but these are not necessary to begin the lesson. For teacher: black board or white board to draw on. For each student: their own script copy and a pencil.

Vocabulary Words

Blocking: where and when the actors move onstage in a play.

Cheating out/Opening up: adjusting an actor's body position onstage to make sure the actor is facing the audience as fully as possible.



Cue: the action or words that signal what happens next.

Entrance: walking onto a stage or performance area

Level: the height or distance from the ground.

Pattern: the path of how an actor enters and moves across the stage.

Spatial Relationship: the distance between people or objects in a given space.

Stage Directions: the areas of the stage (upstage, downstage, stage right, stage left, etc.) based on the actor's perspective as he or she faces the audience.

Tempo: speed an actor or character moves or speaks on stage.

WARM-UP

(5-10 minutes)

Levels and Spatial Relationships

- Explain and model that there are three basic physical levels to work with onstage: high, medium, and low.
- Send three volunteer actors onto the stage or playing space. Give them one chair (optional).
- Ask each actor to create a pose in a different level (so that all three are represented) and freeze in that pose.
- Prompt a quick "switch" into a "freeze" (or count down from five giving actors a five-count transition time): each actor must create a new pose at a different level, working as an ensemble to ensure that all three levels are represented at any one time.
- This is a silent exercise, so that the three actors must not speak to each other while working together as a team to make sure all three levels are represented. Stay frozen in the poses. Allow team to move several different times before you choose final freeze.
- While team is frozen in poses, ask someone from the audience observing to describe what "story" may be told based on the three actors' positions and levels. Then ask the actors to adjust their poses ever-so-slightly using eye focus or physical gesture to enhance that visual story. Notice that everything done on stage gives information and even slight adjustments can help tell a visual story more clearly.
- Send three new volunteers onto the stage or playing area. Add the element of spatial relationships: staying true to the three 'levels,' each person must also be as close to (without touching) or as far away from someone or something else on stage.
- Repeat several "switch" and "freeze" attempts until you choose final frozen poses.

- Ask audience observers to describe this new story. If appropriate, ask audience observers to describe which moment in the play being rehearsed could be seen in this stage picture. Again ask actors to adjust their poses ever-so-slightly using eye focus or physical gesture to enhance the relationship of the characters and/or situations from the play.

ACTIVITY 1

(5 minutes)

Intro to Stage Directions and Blocking

- Create a grid of a stage on the floor, or draw on the board, with nine stage areas (see table below).
- Using the grid show the students the different areas of the stage. Explain how stages used to be raked towards the audience, which led to Downstage being closest to the audience, and Upstage being furthest, and that the orientation is from the actor's point-of-view facing the audience.
- Move to different spots on the grid. Ask students to identify where you are on stage until you feel they've got it.
- On the board write the abbreviations of the stage directions as the students will write it in their scripts. Include movement abbreviations such as cross (X).

Stage Grid:

Up Right (UR)	Upstage Up Center (UC)	Up Left (UL)
Stage Right Center Right (CR)	Center Stage Center Center (CC)	Stage Left Center Left (CL)
Down Right (DR)	Down Center (DC) Downstage	Down Left (DL)

Audience

Stage Directions:

Upstage Right = UR	Upstage Center = UC	Upstage Left = UL
Stage Right = SR	Center Stage = CS	Stage Left = SL
Downstage Right = DR	Downstage Center = DC	Downstage Left = DL

Movement:

Cross = X	Sit = S	Kneel = Kn	Rise = R
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ACTIVITY 2

(20-30 minutes; half work, half sharing)

Staging Through Tableaux

- Pick one of the scenes from the play being rehearsed and, modeling before the entire class, decide on three dynamic tableaux: the opening, closing, and middle (climactic moment or when most people are onstage) for the scene.
- Draw each of these tableaux in a box as from a bird's eye view. This is a good starting point for staging and to the questions of set/furniture needs, blocking, and dramatic arc. This can first be done by either the actors alone or in conjunction with the director.
- Once this process has been modeled, breakout into different scene groups for each group to begin staging their scene beginning with the three tableaux.
- Each group should draw their three tableaux from a bird's eye view on the backside or facing page of their scripts. This should be done relatively quickly, so that students need to make strong choices; their tableaux can be changed later if necessary for more clarity.

Share time: Gather groups together and share the three tableaux by each group moving from freeze of first tableau (opening), into second (middle), into third (closing) without speaking any text.

- Adjust to make sure actors are facing the audience “cheating out” or “opening up” to show as much of themselves fully to the audience as possible.
- Depending on time available this can be a sharing of all groups or selected volunteer groups.
- Explain that when students start rehearsing next, they will speak the lines and move between these tableaux during the scene, choosing when (on which lines in the script) and how (tempo and pattern) to move from one tableau to the next based on the text and character motivations.

Note: This sharing can be the final activity of the lesson and Activity 3 become the next entire lesson, or they can be combined if more time is available than one short class period.

ACTIVITY 3

(One class period or more)

Blocking Rehearsals

- Explain that when students start rehearsing, they will speak the lines and move between their three tableaux during the scene. Begin blocking the scene with the students starting with the first tableau, modeling how a director would work. How do they get from the opening tableau to the middle? Middle to the end?
- Once again, emphasize the importance of notating the blocking in their scripts.
- Directors and actors continue to make choices about blocking. Choosing precisely when and how to move from one tableau to the next is based on logic in the text and character motivations for tempo, physicality and pattern. (For example, if a character is in a hurry they may move quickly and in straight lines; if a character is avoiding something they may move more slowly and in indirect pattern.)

Notes:

- Directors must make sure the actors are facing the audience. They should use levels, spatial relationship, and eye contact/facing away and indicate the actors’ entrances, exits, and location on stage, using stage notation.

- Be sure the actors and stage manager all write down the blocking on their script with the notations from the board.
- Actors **MUST** take blocking notes in pencil on their script. They should write their movements next to their lines.

Share Time

Student groups show their scenes with all movement and text. If time allows, have the student groups first perform their scene with all of the blocking without dialogue. Is the action in the scene clear even without the text? What about the character relationships?

Explain that as rehearsals continue, groups will always rehearse their scene with the same stage pictures and blocking every time to prepare for the final presentation.

Restate what was learned/practiced

Everything on stage gives information, and we want our stage pictures to tell the story of a scene even before adding text. Since students often worry about how to “start” staging, this lesson gives them a basic framework in which they can then move into deeper blocking and staging choices.

Homework/Writing reflection

Continue to make notes in scripts for all scenes: drawing out the three tableaux and notating all character blocking movement. Reflect on how your own character moves and why (tempo fast or slow, physicality angular or loose, paths direct or curvy).

Discussion questions

Which tableaux choices were most clear and why? What character motivations were best reflected in tempo and pattern choices? How can we continue to make deeper choices within the basic framework of the blocking for our character’s objectives/actions? How can we continue to make our staging more dynamic?

Teaching standards met by this lesson

New York State Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy
CCRA.R.1, CCRA.R.9; CCRA.SL.1, CCRA.SL.2, CCRA.SL.4

New York City Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in Theatre

Theatre Making: Acting; Developing Theatre Literacy; Making Connections Through Theatre;
Working with Community and Cultural Resources; Exploring Careers and Lifelong Learning

Elizabeth London is a professional actor, director, voice and master teaching artist based in New York. She has worked Off-Broadway, downtown, regionally and internationally with special focus on Shakespeare and new or devised plays. A Master Teaching Artist for over 10 years, Elizabeth has led residencies in Shakespeare or Viewpoints for both educators and students for many companies, including continuing longtime work with Theatre for a New Audience and the Metropolitan Opera, and with theatre students around the country she has created/directed original large-ensemble shows. Elizabeth narrates audiobooks (www.audible.com) and is a core member of Hook & Eye Theater Company, which devises original work (www.hookandeyetheater.com). Education/training: NYU (BFA in Film); SITI Company, BADA (Oxford and London). Union member AEA. Elizabeth's approach to teaching is experiential for making heightened language accessible and staging dynamic, guiding participants to bring words, characters and stories to vivid life.



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