

The Art of Writing Stage Directions

Plays are meant to be seen on stage, not on the page—right? Right, but before it makes it to the stage, your play must make it through a small army of readers. And then, of course, assuming you survive the readers (and the literary manager and the artistic director), there is the director, the actors, the designers, etc. Each of them wants a clear picture of your play and its world.

When it comes to stage directions, I begin with this simple adage:

Always write action, sometimes write business, never write blocking.

When we talk about "action," we're talking about things that change the circumstances on stage: an entrance or exit, a character drinking poison, hiding a watch, etc.

"Business" includes activity that may help develop a character but aren't necessarily crucial to the story. For instance, characters eating dinner or playing darts or watching television.

Of course, "blocking"—how/where the performers move about on stage—is typically for the director and actors to figure out. I strongly recommend you avoid writing blocking instructions, as that's what prompts directors to tell actors to cross out the stage directions. On that note, before we continue, let's bust a myth...

Myth Alert: Stage Directions Come from the Stage Manager's Book

The idea of crossing out the stage directions likely has its origins in the belief that stage directions come from the stage manager's book and aren't written by the playwright. This was the case with some older shows—when directions from the stage manager's book found their way into the published acting edition—but this hasn't been true of any play since the early 1980s. All stage directions in contemporary acting editions are written by the playwright. Those stage directions are just as important as dialogue.

Other Ways to Use Stage Directions

- Introduce each character in the stage directions as they appear (not just in the Cast of Characters list) with a one-liner which tells us their age and gender and gives the reader (and potential producers) a handle on them: "Annie, mid-20s and a walking accident." Remember, if I'm a producer, I want to know who I can cast in the role, and I don't want to have to interrupt my reading to look back and see who a character is.
- Begin each scene with a clear where and when in the stage directions—and to describe the physical setting if you'd like. This could be as simple as "The

afternoon. A road." Or it could include more specific elements if they're important to the story or creating the world: "The Smiths' living room. A portrait of Abraham Lincoln riding a completely out-of-place elephant hangs on the wall. (etc.)"

- Use stage directions to describe things the audience experiences: "A crack of thunder follows a flash of lightning after a five-count." (The choice of the five-count isn't to micromanage the production, but rather because the time between a lightning flash and the thunder that follows is what indicates how far away the lightning strike is.)

More Stage Direction Guidance

- Stage directions are written to be read. Make them clear, concise and grammatical. There's nothing wrong with giving them a little spin, but don't write a novel.
- Write stage directions in the present tense—and make them as active as possible.
- Don't "overdescribe" a character. For example, maybe in the Police File you created for a character, and you decided that she is "five-foot-three, with red hair and green eyes and heavysset." Which of those elements are crucial to the play and the story you're telling? Leave those elements in. But if an element—for example, the character's height—isn't critical, keep your options open.
- Don't direct the play from the page. Avoid "line readings"—in other words, don't regularly preface lines of dialogue with "sadly," "angrily," etc. I only use line readings if they're crucial—for example, if a line could easily be misinterpreted or a character is lying—which means I might have a handful in a full-length play. Instead, put in a "pause" or a "beat" and leave it to the actors and director to figure it out. You might discover something interesting.
- Be careful about telling us things in the stage directions that an audience would have no way of knowing otherwise. For example, if "Sara feels sad," that has to be communicated through action or dialogue. You can't just tell us in a stage direction that the audience will never see.

Ultimately, stage directions—what characters do and the description of the world they live in—are just as important, if not more so, than what characters say. So give them the attention they deserve.