

SIMPLE GUIDELINES FOR STUDENT DRAMATURGES

1. There is no such thing as dramaturgy without a director.

All dramaturgical work should be inspired by and in service of the concept of the director, a concept that – if involved early enough – the dramaturge might be instrumental in shaping.

The director's vision/approach/concept is going to help you understand what you should be researching, how you should look at the play, what you will need to teach yourself.

This means **you will need to be going to design and production meetings**. Go to as many as possible! At these meetings, you should go and keep quiet unless you are specifically asked a question. Your job is to listen and try to understand what the director is trying to do so that you can help her when called upon to do so. If the dramaturge is paying careful attention and really getting into the mindset of what the director wants, she will often be able to offer solutions to problems presented by the director or designers – or at the very least she will have some ideas about where to find those solutions.

There is, of course, research you can do long before you even meet with a director. A dramaturge can easily read a biography of Hank Williams before working on *Lost Highway*, the Hank Williams musical, or, say, Sarah Schulman's *People in Trouble* before working on *Rent*. This is smart. Still, it might make more sense to talk to a director about what her approach to *Big River* will be before sitting down to read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. A director might have a particular idea that she wants to bring out of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* that you might want to know about *before* you spend time reading the novel on which it is based. If the director is going to focus on, for example, makeup, paint, and covered surfaces as themes, you will want that in your head *while you read* so that you can pull out helpful quotations or ideas.

Production histories are also valuable research that you can find ahead of time. But different directors feel differently about production histories. Some want to know nothing about what another director did, and some love looking through those ideas. Even so, **production histories should almost never go to actors**. They are good for dramaturge–director discussion and not much more (although, of course, sometimes the director will have you send some research from a production history to a designer). Where a production history can be *most* helpful is in early meetings with directors and designers, when a solution that a previous director has used can be modified to solve a problem with which the current production team is dealing. Production histories are also useful if you are cutting an old script. A little comment from the dramaturge could save an actor a lot of headache as she tries to make, say, the Nurse's sex-jokes about little baby-Juliet from *R&J* 1.3 work as a comedy routine:

DRAMATURGE. Most productions cut these lines.

DIRECTOR. They do?

ACTOR. Oh, thank *god*!

If you haven't yet met with the director, or if the director has not yet committed to a concept, reading **other plays by the same author** is something you can always do as good research. Knowledge of Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* and *Cleansed* is invaluable for anyone working on her *Crave*. And if you are working on Howard Barker, it is essential that you read *at least* two other plays of his so that you get a clear idea of how they work.

For Shakespeare, three suggestions of things to read. A) Read the critical apparatus to the Arden edition and at least one other critical edition carefully. B) Reading other plays in the same genre will also be very helpful, especially those *not* by Shakespeare but in the same general area. *Philaster*, for example, will help anyone doing *Cymbeline*, and *The Malcontent* and *The Spanish Tragedy* will unquestionably help you with *Hamlet*. C) If you can, read the source material for the play. The Arden will direct you to this if you are unsure what the source material is. A reading Story 9 from Day 2 of the *Decameron* will definitely assist with a production of *Cymbeline*, and checking out the *Amphitryo* and the *Maenechmi* will be helpful with *Comedy of Errors*. You will want to read the source material for non-Shakespeare work, too.

For plays in translation, check out more than one. Ibsen, Calderón, Dürrenmatt, Brecht, Chekhov, Lorca, and even Machiavelli will have multiple translations available. Knowing the different choices translators make can be enormously helpful to directors and actors.

2. Know your own position.

You may feel as though you have a relationship with the director where you can offer suggestions, interpretations, contrary opinions. All of this is fine, but it is very important for you to know your place. In most cases, the director will already have an assistant director, maybe even two, and will already have a team of designers. Remember that your job is to offer solutions to problems hampering the director's vision, it is not to advance your own vision.

You may, of course, dislike the director's approach. That's not really your business. You *might* be in a position to try to steer the director toward a different approach at times or with certain scenes, but be careful with this. Let's just say you have a *great* idea for a gesture or moment in the production that really gets to what the author was trying to say originally – but that moment might undermine the cohesion of the production as a whole or distract from something the director is trying to focus on for this particular production. Your job is to help the director realize her vision, first and foremost.

In short, do not try to make the production into something that *you* want it to be. That is simply not your job. (And it is not a designer's job either, for that matter.)

From Tommy Heller: Designers tend to like to do their own research. Rather than coming into a design meeting with a PowerPoint of images and information, let the designers do the work themselves. They all have their own processes, just like you have yours, and it's best to leave those processes uninterrupted. Of course, if a designer asks you to research something for her, you do it, but do not present it unless asked.

Director David Reed thinks it is important to underline here that a large amount of the dramaturge's job is to be *reactive* to the needs of the artists in the room.

3. What kind of research should I do?

Research what interests you and what interests the director and actors. The thing about theatrical production is that some little detail that seems trivial or even silly might be really inspiring or helpful to a designer or director. You might think no one cares about the size and shape of prison cells at the Bastille, but a director or a lighting designer might be interested in just such a detail. A costume designer once asked me about the dogs who appeared in a single scene in a musical. She was going to make ears for the actors to wear and wanted to model them on the correct breed. The play didn't specify, but the source material did, and the designer was delighted.

You may be more interested in images – research those. You may be more interested in music – research that. In any case, do your digging based on conversations between you and your director, and then let your own impulse to uncover new things take over. *You really don't know what you will find!* And that is a good thing.

4. What is a dramaturge's actual job, though?

A dramaturge is the person in the room who knows the most about the *text* of the play. You don't need to consider yourself the “defender of the text” or any heroic term like that – the text is probably not being assailed, and the director's vision is more important than the text in any case – just the person who knows the text really, really well. Knowing the text and related texts will allow the dramaturge to help the director in myriad ways, especially if the play is very old, very new, or in translation.

From Walter Kniec: Exercise good judgement when presenting your information. You don't want to try to show off everything you know. Instead, scan your mental library for information that is pertinent to the aim of the production. Information is powerful because of its effect on an idea. Directors and designers can throw a lot of things at the wall to see what sticks; a dramaturge, however, needs to have a more measured approach, because the job of the dramaturge is helping to develop ideas that are being introduced. You don't want to overwater the plant, and too much information can do that sometimes.

But it is also ok *not* to know everything. If someone asks you something to which you don't have an answer, just reply that you do not know at the moment but will be happy to go find that info.

5. Go to rehearsals.

A dramaturge should attend all early rehearsals. You will want to be on hand for table work, presentations from designers, etc. The director may also ask you to present something to the actors before rehearsals begin.

Do not stop going to rehearsals after the first week. How often should you go to rehearsals? The answer is: **Frequently**. With a show that is fairly simple, you may not need to go very often. A dramaturge may not have a lot to do at rehearsals for A... *My Name Is Alice* or *Almost, Maine*. Twice a week will probably suffice for a simpler show where a director's approach is straightforward. For some shows, however, twice a week may not be enough: For a show with a changing script, you may want to attend every day. New work and very old work both need a dramaturge on hand with consistency. A director who is setting his production of *Macbeth* in the U.S. during the War of 1812 might, for example, need an immediate substitute for the words "kingdom" and "crown" in the middle of scene-work. This is something that a dramaturge who knows the text well (and who knows other texts from the period) could provide fairly instantaneously.

From Tommy Heller: If your show is not very new and not very old, do not attend every rehearsal. This can allow you to look at the production in a different way. Theatre is sometimes justifying actions, whether it be artistically or logistically, but sometimes the audience will not see it this way. It is your job to know the director's vision, but the dramaturge can also serve as the first audience member. This does not mean you should try to *fix* the show, but instead, analyze how a moment is feeding into the director's vision. If you have a close relationship with a director, you can ask her to clarify a moment you don't understand and/or tell her how that moment might be reading to an audience.

Still, if you are at rehearsals frequently you will have a very good idea of what the actors and director are working on and what they need help with. The production will begin to make *sense* to you, and you simply will be able to give better notes when they are needed. It will also enable you to answer questions asked by the marketing department or reviewers from local media, and it will help you lead an excellent talkback, if that is part of your job description.

6. Actor-packet: yea or nay?

There are no hard and fast rules about this. I have found that actor-packets are often simply discarded by actors. The reason for this is that *most* of your notes won't apply to any one actor. Many of your notes will be for "all" the actors or for the lead actors. This creates the following problem:

The actor playing Howie Newsome in *Our Town* is not going to be interested in your disquisitions on the poetic resonances of the flowers in Mrs. Webb's garden, (although those may be of great interest to the actress playing Mrs. Webb and the actor playing the Stage Manager). This means that your Howie Newsome actor is

not going to know where in your actor-packet the notes for *him* are. So you're wasting your time giving him a thirty- or forty-page packet of research.

Give the actor playing Howie the things that will help *him specifically*. He needs to know about horses, about milk prices, and about dairy production in New England in 1901. (Obviously his scenes are *about* memory and routine and neighborhood and all sort of other important Thornton Wilder ideas, but you want to give the actor things that will help him draw the lines of the character. Let the director talk about the themes of the play with the actors.)

So... an actor-packet *might* be helpful, but it needs to be prepared with a great deal of thought. You want it to be inviting for the actors – so that they know how to use it and *want* to use it. What you *don't* want to do is to waste your time working on a forty-page document that no one reads. It might be much better to give each actor her own little mini-packet, or give out info in small, one-page or two-page doses over time or even via a facebook group.

Some actor-packet-related words from Tommy Heller: Allow your research to be malleable; something you may have found useful before rehearsals began may not be relevant to what is being discovered in rehearsal. Have all the information you *would* include in a packet prepared by first rehearsal, but decide when to give that information to actors. Show your findings at the appropriate time – a time when it will be most useful for that actor to know it.

Also keep in mind the group to whom you are likely giving these packets – students. Between classes, rehearsals, and jobs, most just don't have *time* to sit and read a giant packet of information. Try creating an interactive way of presenting the information. Rather than handing actors a giant packet of paper or showing them a PowerPoint or Prezi lecture, maybe a movie or a museum trip works better! Think of engaging ways that might help the actors understand their characters and the play better.

7. But I do get to give notes to actors, right?

Haha. Yes. Yes you do... if the director says you can. **In other words, you will need to ask first**, and establish your director's trust. But dramaturges who take actors aside and quietly give them notes can actually make a director's job *much much* easier and save her a lot of time. Still, make sure this is ok with a director. You may prefer, in fact, to give *any* notes you have to the director – at least until you establish your own relationship with the director and she trusts you.

Always remember that a point of a note is to help the actor and help the production. Sometimes it is the wrong time for a note, even if the note is "right".

Notes to actors should generally be restricted to the meaning and pronunciation of words in the script. As you work more and more as a dramaturge you will get better at being able to hear when an actor does not know what she is saying. Actors will occasionally just plow through difficult phrases in, say, Fletcher or Shaw, if they don't understand them. The actor is "making it

work”, as they used to say on reality television. But you are here to help the actor! Approach cautiously (some of them bite), and give the actor information about the line that can help it finally make sense to her. Many actors (the wiser ones) will actually just *ask* the dramaturge what a phrase means if they don’t understand the text.

As for pronunciation, make doubly sure you know how to say a word before you go telling an actor how to say it. You shouldn’t be giving a note if you do not know how to say the word. And anyway, why guess? **Look it up. You have time.** Google translate can help you pronounce words in other languages - even Latin or Japanese! And if you’re doing Shakespeare, there are literally *dozens* of audio-recordings with great actors who pronounce these words correctly. (For the record, *sirrah* is pronounced SEER-uh [ˈsɪr-ə], not suh-RAH [səɹ-ˈɑː].)

It might be wise to note, here, that just because a particular pronunciation is “correct”, doesn’t mean it is right for a production. A director may well decide that she thinks a word sounds odd and will pull audiences out of a show and so may opt for an incorrect pronunciation but one that is better for the production. And though we know that the mad, marrying husband of *Taming of the Shrew* was probably called Petruccio (with a *ch*) by the Elizabethans, a director may opt to call him Petruchio (with a *ck*) because she likes the way it sounds. This may frustrate your dramaturgical sensibilities, but we will all survive. Let your director know the correct pronunciation, and then let the director decide what to do with that information.

If your play is in verse, you will also have to deal with scansion. Some directors want to give notes about this and have specific ideas of how a play scans. Some actors and directors don’t care about scansion at all. As a rule, you should avoid giving notes about scansion unless you have a good enough relationship with an actor and you know a note will be helpful. Even then, it might be more helpful to approach such a note as an idea for performance (“Try stressing this word instead of this word and see if that does something for you.”) rather than a statement of fact (“The stress actually belongs on this word and not this word. See there? You’ve been saying it wrong. It’s actually a trochaic foot.”). The point is not to be correct. The point is to create a more productive work environment for the actor and to help her with a sequence with which she might be struggling.

8. How to write a program note or fashion a lobby display.

The purpose of program notes and lobby displays are very similar. Remember that you do not want to tell an audience how they should feel, and you do not want to *interpret* the play. In other words, do not give a reading of the play in your program note. The play is not “about” any one thing in particular, so do not tell the audience it is.

You will also want to be careful not to reproduce the director’s own note (if she is writing one) or use a favorite image of the director’s. Be sure to check on this.

Some possible approaches to the program note:

- A. Tell the audience an anecdote from behind the scenes. Some image or line or particular event that occurred during rehearsal that really shaped things for the ac-

tors or designers or director (or the ensemble as a whole). Audiences *love* a window into production. Even more than watching a show, they love feeling as though they have access to the show behind the show. An anecdote that gets to some kind of thematic meaning *as well* as giving an audience “backstage access” is perfect.

- B. Give the audience notice about some easily-missed image or moment that you believe is crucial. I might tell an audience for *Woyzeck* to pay attention to the peas, for example, or ask an audience to look out for the sonnet form of the first meeting of Romeo and Juliet. Asking the audience to keep an eye out for something they might otherwise ignore can help a director succeed at communicating the production’s themes and meaning.
- C. Make the audience feel intelligent! Give them a little bit of background that makes them feel like experts as they watch. Audiences love feeling smart, and if you give them some tools *before* they watch, they will feel intelligent *as* they watch because they will pick up on things more easily. One might, for example, point out similarities between *Macbeth*’s weird sisters and the fairies in *Midsummer*. A datum like this has the potential to enrich audience pleasure when the sisters first meet Banquo and Glamis. Explaining some background necessary to a joke, too, can help an audience understand and enjoy a joke when it arrives.
- D. One might just as easily ask questions in order to heighten mystery about something that seems easily explicable. Sticking with *Macbeth* for a moment, it might be interesting to pose to the audience the question of who the weird sisters actually *are*. A series of queries – How old are they? What is their power? Do they make anything happen? What is their relationship with Hecate? Are they evil or benign? Are they dispassionate or invested? – can set the audience thinking about something to which they might not have turned their attention. Questions like this can work like a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, making something that an audience would normally take for granted seem strange indeed.
- E. Yet another tactic is to ask an audience to hold off judgment. Alex Pica, a student of mine working on a production of *Hedda Gabler*, reported that her cast of student actors had spent quite a good deal of time during table-work pathologizing Hedda, explaining her behavior away by diagnosing her with some disorder or other, allegedly undiagnosed in Ibsen’s time. Alex worried that the audience, too, might be quick to pathologize Hedda and so miss Ibsen’s actual diagnosis, which, as she saw it, was to point out the misogynist sickness of his entire society. Her dramaturge’s note attacked this frontally, asking the audience to avoid pathologization and to look instead at the world in which Hedda lived.

Ideas for lobby displays:

- A. Consider reproducing some of the coolest research you found. Those images you found of white people protesting black folks moving into “their” Chicago neighborhoods will look great outside your production of *Clybourne Park*. Images of suffragettes fighting for their rights in England will be perfect outside your production of *Her Naked Skin*.

- B. Go interactive! Is your show about immigration? Ask audiences to stick pins into a map. Is your show about sexuality? Ask audiences to locate themselves on updated Kinsey scales.
- C. Lobby displays might also be a place to display production history research. Images from famous productions of a classic play place your university production within a larger history of the theatre and can be educational and enjoyable for audiences and other students. Images of famous Juliets or famous Prince Hals or famous Noras will remind audiences of the legacies to which today's students are heirs.
- D. Is there some particular artwork or artist's work mentioned in the show? Perhaps this is something your audience would want to google after seeing your show. If so, put it in the lobby so that they don't have to look it up; it will increase their enjoyment of the show. You might, for example, put an image of Velázquez's *Portrait of Juan de Pareja* in the lobby of your production of *Disgraced*, and it might make a great deal of sense to place an image of Giotto's *Lamentation* outside of your production of *Pentecost*.
- E. Don't be afraid to do something silly in the lobby, as well – especially with a very serious play. Even the Athenian tragedians ended their trilogies of bloodshed and murder with a satirical spoof of the story that had just finished. An audience might want to read about *An American Werewolf in London* after watching *The Duchess of Malfi*, or they might like to look at a display case of really fake-looking asps after watching *Antony and Cleopatra*.

9. Documents or other resources you might wish to create:

- Spotify or YouTube playlist
- Museum (or other art/history) trips
- Glossary
- Scene breakdown and chart for character tracking. A director may want to do some actor doubling, so a chart may be very useful for this. (Aaron has examples to share.)
- Multimedia or movie presentation
- Maps or collages of any places mentioned (You can actually use Google Maps to make a shareable document that pins locations and gives collaborators a street view.)
- Create your own website, blog, or facebook page (this can be used later in marketing)

10. Tips from student dramaturge Tommy Heller:

TIP #1: Educational dramaturgy is hard. I don't want to scare anyone, but it's tough being a student and doing this job. There will be responsibility clashes, times where you disagree with a professor, or moments you feel you are not being utilized. Don't let these moments get to you. Instead, think of what you're learning and how what

you learn in this situation can be beneficial to you in the future (whether you are dramaturge or some other position).

TIP #2: Do not let this position get to your head. Remember you are a collaborator. When reading as many books or articles as you will be doing, it's easy to feel like the smartest person in the room. Remember to always be accessible, kind, and willing to collaborate. Also, do not feel the need to "correct" the show to tailor to your liking; that is not your job. Instead, think of how each moment feeds into the world everyone is creating and whether they work or do not work.

TIP #3: Make sure you are balancing textual and historical information. I, for one, am really interested in analyzing how the text works. Sometimes I get wrapped up in analyzing the play and neglect the "facts" of a piece. Other dramaturges only care about the facts of a time period, location, etc. Make sure you are helping to create the world while also recognizing what the world is doing. This may be a tricky thing to do, and I wish I could offer some sort of cool way to help, but it's just something you have to keep in mind.

TIP 4#: Document all of your work. At some point, you may have to reflect on your work or provide a short sample of what your involvement was (like if you get nominated and decide to go to KCACTF). If you have rehearsal logs, lobby display PDFs, and a copy of your program note, your life will be so much easier. Remember this is more than likely going on your résumé (even if just for a little while), and you may want to provide some materials at some point.

TIP #5: Do not be afraid to mess up. If I had a dollar for every time I said something stupid or not at all useful during rehearsal, I'd have enough to pay for the credit I have to register for to do this. You occasionally will present useless information or something you think will blow everyone's minds but then doesn't. That's OK. Just brush it off and figure out why it didn't work. Document what is wrong and how you can learn for next time.

TIP #6: Use your advisor. I promise you I am not sucking up to Aaron here, but *go*. You will have questions, whether it be what to do or if your research is relevant, so don't let your pride get in the way of asking him questions. I totally understand wanting to do things independently, but if you feel stuck, go to him. He may seem intimidating, but he only wants to help you!