

English A

Literature

for the IB Diploma
2nd Edition



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Approaches to teaching and learning in conventions of drama

1.3

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Learning objectives

In this chapter you will...

- connect drama to approaches to learning, course concepts, and areas of exploration
- explore conventions and expectations of drama
- consider the advantages and limitations of staging
- understand the creation of momentum
- identify and interpret dramatic structures and their effects on the audience
- understand drama as performance literature
- communicate ideas through a variety of individual and collaborative activities
- analyse, evaluate, and appreciate a range of dramatic works through:
 - readers, writers, and texts
 - time and space
 - intertextuality
 - global issues.

Every play has one common aspect: it is written to be performed. What this means for you as a reader is that you must call upon your imagination to see the **characters** and to hear the same words, sounds, actions, and movements that you would experience as a member of an audience viewing a play. Imagination plays a role in many disciplines, but in drama it activates a reader's **creativity, transforming** flat text on a page into an animated form ready for life on the stage. As readers turn themselves into viewers, they negotiate a new role with writers and text, a role that makes the study of drama quite different from other literary forms.

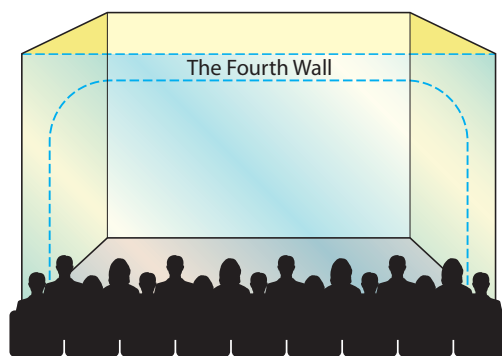
The **collaborative** nature of drama also means that **representations** of a single text are always changing. Staging, directing, and even the context in which a play is performed affect how it is interpreted. Given the fluid nature of drama, it is essential to study the conventions of this literary form. We've devoted the first part of this chapter to the study of the conventions of drama so that you can ground your interpretations in foundational knowledge of the form. Once you've mastered the conventions, you'll read, analyze, and evaluate works of drama through the three **areas of exploration**, course **concepts** and **global issues**. This part of the chapter will allow you engage with texts through both collaborative and individual activities. The end goal is to build solid entries for your learner portfolio, skills for your upcoming assessments, and an appreciation for this performance-inspired literary form.

Theatrical performances are among the most immediate forms of literary presentation.



While drama and prose fiction share the common elements of **plot**, characters, and **themes**, the ways in which playwrights **communicate** these elements is quite distinct. The stage, and the position of the audience in relation to that stage, impose limitations which the prose fiction writer does not have. For example, the physical space limits the types of action a playwright can display. While in prose fiction readers can imagine descriptions of horses stampeding, elephants parading, or characters water-skiing, such action is generally more difficult to achieve on stage. Prose fiction writers also have a variety of **perspectives** or angles of vision to use in their works. The playwright essentially has one point of view, and that is the dramatic perspective of the audience members, sometimes referred to as the 'fourth wall.' This localised perspective creates a different way of considering time and space. Certainly, **cultural** and historical contexts shape meaning, but the physical world of the stage does this as well. If a playwright wants to reveal motivation for an action, that motivation must be revealed directly to the audience. We have to listen and watch the characters to discover their interior thoughts. **Dialogue**, then, becomes the primary vehicle for the playwright. Character movement or lack of movement, action and interaction, gestures, props, lighting and sound – the configuration of the stage itself – all contribute to the experience of the audience. But the playwright's words, and how they are spoken by the actors, often produce the greatest effects on the audience.

Even if you are unable to watch a play physically, learning the conventions and expectations of drama will enable you to 'see' the play in your mind's eye as you read it. This ability to imagine the play from an audience member's perspective is transformative. The type of creativity activated here is critical for the reader's immersion into the world that the playwright has created to be witnessed on a stage.



Conventions and expectations of drama

Drama as an 'artifice', a creative construct, employs a number of strategies that bring to life the imaginary world of the play. Playwrights may want their audiences to embrace the world on stage wholly or in part. Realistic drama invites audiences to view the world on stage as a familiar one. The characters, words, actions, and stage sets, regardless of **culture** or time frame, are typically intended to be approachable rather than alienating. The characters' emotions are intended to provoke a sympathetic response. The outcome of this response is often seen as minimising the emotional distance between audience and performance.

In plays, the audience experiences more emotion and participates actively from behind the fourth wall. This 'active' participation means that the audience willingly 'suspends

Info box

The 'fourth wall' is the imaginary wall through which the audience witnesses the action of a play.

The 'fourth wall'.

Bertolt Brecht was particularly known for the 'alienation effect' in his plays.



According to Pablo Picasso, 'Art is a lie that brings us nearer to the truth.' To what extent does this claim apply to works you have studied in drama? Why would the dramatic form be particularly suited for a discussion about this topic?

TOK

A proscenium stage.

Info box

Often used as a synonym for the stage itself, the proscenium stage technically lies between the edge of the stage and the curtain, and denotes where the 'fourth wall' begins.

disbelief' and accepts the world on stage before them as realistic and, therefore, that it can offer them emotional intensity and relief. The writer, and by extension the director and actors, work to create a specific type of representation of reality that offers an immersion in a world that does not exist beyond the stage, but is unquestionably believable in the moment.

Other playwrights may want their audiences to be fully aware of the artifice of their presentation, and may consciously work at dissolving the fourth wall so that audiences are reminded throughout the performance that the presentation before them is just that – a presentation that challenges the audience's subjectivity. This dramatic experience keeps audiences at a purposeful distance from the emotional impact of the work. A detached, somewhat objective, audience perspective is the goal, similar to Bertolt Brecht's 'alienation effect'. This alienation effect seeks to keep audience members aware that what they are witnessing on stage is purely artificial; in this way, it is intended that audiences will remain alienated, or emotionally distant, from the world they witness on stage. The intertextual process of analysing such disparate representations, one that draws in audiences, another that keeps them at a distance, reveals how the form of a play can steer viewer perspectives and affect how meaning is negotiated between **readers, writers, and texts**.

The audience's emotional investment in a play can be manipulated by the playwright, and those involved in the play's performance, to great effect. **Dramatic irony**, for example, where the audience recognises the truth or falsity of words or actions when characters do not, can heighten the emotional investment of the audience. In Act 3 of *Hamlet*, young *Hamlet* has the perfect opportunity to avenge his father's death by killing King Claudius in the chapel, but decides not to kill a man in prayer who will likely be forgiven by God for repenting. The audience is fully aware that Claudius' prayers are not sincere and that Hamlet is missing a perfect opportunity for revenge. The tension that such knowledge produces in the audience can drive the play forward, creating a kind of momentum, as audience members are encouraged to anticipate an eventual revelation of truth.

What are the conventions of drama and what sort of expectations do we bring to plays as audience members or readers? For all drama, we have a stage on which actors play



out the words and actions described by the playwright. Stages come in various shapes and sizes with equally varied configurations of audience seating. The stage is the setting of the play's action, and the world of character interaction. To stage a play means to bring the play to life, to have its characters move through a particular type

of time and (physical) space. Staging, then, refers to all of the decisions involved in a play's production including the positioning of actors, their movements on stage, and the construction of the set (including the placement and physical attributes of props), as well as lighting, costume, and sound devices. A filmed version of a play offers a different type of staging and additional possibilities for settings in multiple contexts.

Your task, as a reader of a play, is to pay attention to every detail of the stage. As you participate in this creative, transformative process, you may construct the stage in your imagination, noting positions, shapes, colours, and sizes of every detail provided in the stage directions. Note where doors and windows are located because these staging devices differentiate the interior world of the play (on stage) from its exterior world (off stage). Even in plays where the stage directions are few, clues in dialogue that mention time of day or weather patterns affect how you imagine a scene.

Characterisation

Actors assume the roles of characters. And, just as in prose fiction, a play can have major and minor characters, **foil** characters, a **protagonist**, an **antagonist**, and, in the case of memory plays, a narrator.

You will need to examine characters carefully and pay particular attention to stage directions regarding the way that a character is described initially. Note any physical and costume descriptions that appear in the stage directions so that you can imagine a character visually. Also note any stage direction that describes the way a character speaks. Often, the manner in which a line is delivered can be just as important, or more so, than the words themselves. In watching a play, we have the added benefit of the actor's voice, which can suggest subtle meanings beyond the words themselves. When reading, however, voice moderation, accenting, and pacing of the playwright's words can only be inferred through written stage directions.

Actions on stage, whether overt or subtle, together with the words spoken by characters, advance the plot of the play. **Momentum**, which is what drives the play forward, is often associated with increasing tension. As you read, you must be sensitive to those actions or situations that create reaction in one or more of the characters. These reactions allow you to follow character development. By reading closely you can identify what subject matter, action, or interaction triggers, for example, reactions such as an explosively tense moment or a moment of absolute silence. Both reactions are important to recognise because in either situation momentum builds. In a sense, the reader and the text are caught in a tactile interplay.

By creating the forward motion, the momentum, of a play, the playwright allows the audience or reader to invest emotionally in the characters and their situations on stage. Tension, whether overt or subtly presented, extends to the audience/reader. Ideally, the audience/reader embraces this tension, driving forward their engagement with the plot. Quite simply, momentum begins the moment that the audience/reader wants to know what is going to happen next.



▲ Dramatic action can be the fulfillment of rising tension, or can create new tensions in itself.



▲ A theatre in the round

Info box

Memory plays use a character as a narrator who typically stands off to the side of the stage and provides background exposition, clarification, or explanation of the drama unfolding on the stage.

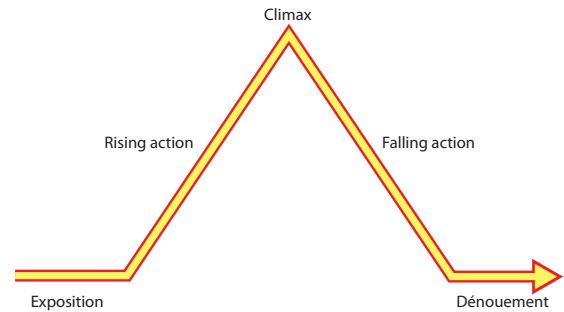
▶ Facial expressions can be at least as important as the words themselves.

▶ Silence on stage often prompts silence from the audience, as they are waiting for something important to happen or be said.

Dramatic structure

In 1863, German dramatist and novelist Gustav Freytag created his 'Pyramid' to explain the predictable order for the unfolding of a play. The five-part structure was basically as follows:

- **exposition**
- **rising action**
- **climax/crisis** (a turning point)
- **falling action/reversal**
- **dénouement.**



Freytag's Pyramid.

Of course, not all dramas follow this model. Rather than beginning with the prescribed exposition or background, many playwrights choose to engage their audience from the outset, seemingly dropping their audiences into the action of the play. This immediate engagement in the middle of action – '**in medias res**' – is often provocative. Audiences and readers alike have little time to ease into the action of the play. The effects are sometimes startling, or confusing, but the expectation is that spectators are actively engaged from the onset. Some playwrights seem to 'play off' the audience's reactions by allowing characters to 'break the fourth wall' and speak directly to the audience members. Note how the form changes over time and through space. Place, period, and culture inform the choices playwrights make in shaping their plays, and such choices affect how the final work is produced and received.

The well-made play

One modification of Freytag's traditional five-part structure is the structure that 19th-century Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen used to great effect – the well-made play. In this format, the plot involves a character withholding a secret. Through a series of events and actions, tension and suspense build steadily to the moment of climax when the secret is revealed and the character's fear of ultimate loss is translated into gain. Death and destruction give way to freedom and understanding – a new life, so to speak, emerges for the character.

A well-made play incorporates many of the following elements:

- a protagonist's secret
- mistaken **identity**
- misplaced documents
- well-timed entrances and exits
- a battle of wits
- a climactic scene revealing the secret
- logical **dénouement.**

We will examine these elements in detail later in this chapter in our areas of exploration section. In this section you will have the opportunity to apply the concepts of dramatic convention and the subsequent expectations for you as a reader of drama. You will also expand your understanding of the three approaches, or lenses of analysis, that you will encounter in this course along with the seven conceptual understandings that provide a sense of continuity as you move from one text to another, from one form to another. These seven concepts establish a framework for comparative observations of texts within a form (two plays) or of texts in differing forms (a play and a poem).



Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.



Medea.



Waiting for Godot.

Other dramatic classifications

In addition to the traditional five-part play and the well-made play, there are a number of other types of plays that you may study in one or more parts of the programme including theatre of the absurd, classical or Elizabethan comedy and tragedy, and tragicomedy.

Theatre of the absurd, a term coined by dramatist and critic Martin Esslin, refers to a non-realistic form of drama. Characters, staging, and action all run counter to our expectations of realistic drama. The world of the absurd is peopled with confusion, despair, illogicality, and incongruity. Action is frequently repetitive or seemingly irrational. Characters are often confused, and metaphysical themes tend to reinforce that the world is incomprehensible. Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* are well-known plays of this form. Texts of this type connect to the concept of representation as they challenge our perception of reality.

The Bald Soprano.



Connections

The more realistic the play, the more often the playwright intends to engage the audience emotionally. Less realistic drama, such as absurdist plays, often disregards the emotional sympathies of the audience in favour of their intellectual responses. Do not assume that every playwright wants their audiences to identify with characters or their situations.

Considering theme in drama

Themes in drama, like those in prose fiction, are ideas that express some aspect of human nature. Theme expresses lessons common to the human condition, so the time and place of the play is inconsequential to the lessons about what it means to be human. While thematic ideas can be expressed in single words or short phrases, theme is expressed in sentence form. For example, the word 'fear' is a thematic idea while the statement 'Anger and rage are often manifestations of fear' would be a statement of theme.

Activity 1 See what themes you can construct from the following thematic ideas.

- jealousy
- forgiveness
- love
- freedom
- competition
- revenge

Themes often transcend time and space but they do not exist in a vacuum. The readers' experiences – their culture and their perspectives – give rise to how themes are transformed and interpreted for each text.

Considering time in drama

In earlier chapters we discussed how time and space provide a sense of culture and context, a backdrop that helps us interpret aspects of a text such as character actions and motivations. Time here is historical in nature.

But how does a playwright account for the passage of time on stage? Time can take on a meaning of its own. Although the play unfolds in real time in front of the audience, the time it covers within the story is often much longer.

In some instances, a playwright can use a variety of devices to indicate the passing of time. We know that closing the curtain or blacking out the stage implicitly signals that there may be a significant change when the curtain opens or the lights on stage come up. The scene could be changed to a different location, the set could be modified to indicate some significant action has taken place, or the time frame could have changed – moving forward or backward in time. These mechanical devices work the way that a chapter break or a noticeable white space (an interstices) works in prose fiction. They enable audiences to anticipate, and be open to, change. Other stage actions can also be effective in showing the passing of time – winding a clock, lighting a lamp, or using visuals such as a sunset visible to the audience through a stage window can convey time passing. Sounds, like the ringing of an alarm clock or a rooster crowing, can also signal a change in time, as can characters donning nightclothes or simply saying ‘Goodnight, we’ll speak more of this in the morning.’

As a reader, you can expect that time will progress within the literal time span of the performance. Apart from the passage of time that an audience member observes as it occurs on stage, time can also function in relation to other conventions of drama. For example, the pacing of a scene can influence the momentum of the play itself, as well as how we respond to characters and their interactions. In Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, for example, time functions as an antagonist. Time is Nora’s enemy. Ibsen chooses to slow the pace of some scenes and heighten the pace of others. When observing a play, the pace of dialogue is obvious. When reading a play, however, this determination is a bit more difficult. The reader will need to observe the dialogue between two characters. Short lines, spoken in rapid fire, will create a quicker pace, a staccato effect much like bantering. Slowing the pace of dialogue is created through starts and stops, pauses, and repetitions. Stage directions also work to slow the pace of dialogue. Actor movement, entering or exiting the stage, moving from one side of the stage to the other, or standing motionless without saying a word, slows the momentum of a scene.

Activity 2 Imagine that you are a director. How would you reveal the passage of time to an audience in a theatre in the following situations?

- 1) A shift from night to day.
- 2) A character dies in one scene and several months have passed in the next scene.
- 3) A character has been on a long trip and has now arrived in a different location.
- 4) A character must hurry because he/she is running out of time.
- 5) A young child is now much older, perhaps a young adult.

Connections

The multifaceted notion of time is another way that the playwright communicates with the reader/audience, using the creative process to convey emotion and meaning.

What constitutes a 'striking theatrical experience'?

When all is said and done, when that curtain comes down, the lights fade, or you turn that last page, what thoughts and feelings do you carry with you?

Peter Brook, author and film and theatre critic, seeks an answer to these questions in his text entitled *The Empty Space* (1968):

'I know of one acid test in the theatre. When a performance is over, what remains? Fun can be forgotten, but powerful emotion also disappears and good arguments lose their thread. When emotion and argument are harnessed to a wish from the audience to see more clearly into itself—then something in the mind burns. The event scorches on to the memory of an outline, a taste, a trace, a smell—a picture. It is the play's central image that remains, its silhouette, and if the elements are rightly blended this silhouette will be its meaning, this shape will be the essence of what it has to say. When years later I think of a striking theatrical experience I find a kernel engraved on my memory: two tramps under a tree, an old woman dragging a cart, a sergeant dancing, three people on a sofa in hell—or occasionally a trace deeper than any **imagery**. I haven't a hope of remembering the meanings precisely, but from the kernel I can reconstruct a set of meanings. Then a purpose will have been served. A few hours could amend my thinking for life. This is almost but not quite impossible to achieve.'

As you work through the following activities and approaches to three dramatic works, consider how your appreciation of the playwright's choices, his or her dramatic strategies, contributes to your theatrical experience of each text.

Connections

A striking theatrical experience, as defined by Brook, is often encapsulated into a single moment, a single image on stage that holds insight into understanding the self.

Areas of exploration: analyse, evaluate, appreciate

Now that you have a working knowledge of dramatic conventions, we will take a closer look at how these conventions work in tandem with course concepts and areas of exploration. You will study three specific dramatic works in this section, each focusing on a different area of exploration. As you work through the activities, consider how the areas of exploration, along with accompanying concepts, help deepen your understanding of dramatic conventions and open up the texts in different ways.

I. *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell

II. *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen

III. *The Visit* by Friedrich Dürrenmatt

What type of knowledge does Brook suggest we gain from artistic experiences? Why do you think it may be more important to 'reconstruct' a set of new meanings from a 'kernel' of memory rather than recall the actual event accurately?

TOK

Readers, writers, and texts: an approach to Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916)

At the heart of this **area of exploration**, as with any of the four forms, is close reading, a type of **research/inquiry** that requires paying attention to every word, every detail that is provided by a writer, as well as observing what is not stated but implied. The choices that writers make contribute to the meaning of their texts regardless of form. But the role of the reader is also crucial to generating meaning.

The subject matter of a play, and the playwright's attitude towards it, along with dramatic strategies that a playwright chooses, produce effects in the audience and the reader alike. Our thoughts and feelings hinge on the words and actions of characters, the way those words are stated (tone), and our individual experiences as readers or observers. Recognising the aesthetic nature of literature means that, as readers, we admit a degree of subjectivity, based on our individual experiences. This admission works in tandem with the objective mindset of analysis. Meaning is negotiated and constructed within the interaction of these two distinct responses – personal experience and analytical perspective. You may recognise this delicate balance between personal and shared knowledge from your Theory of Knowledge course: the more you know about drama and its conventions and the strategies available to the playwright, coupled with your own experience as a reader, the more opportunity you have to negotiate meaning.

Readers of drama must also be aware of their own processes as readers, their own emotional reactions and intellectual awareness. For example, when is your disbelief suspended – when do you embrace the play as its own reality? When are you moved to laugh, to cry, to feel anger or pity? Are you aware of your own tension, or anticipation, as the play moves forward? Are there moments in the action of the play when it is difficult to maintain focus? Why? Does the play engage you from the opening scene, or does your engagement grow in accordance with the momentum the playwright produces? Do you like one character more than another? And, if you do, do you know why?

In Susan Glaspell's one-act play, *Trifles*, close reading begins with her initial observations noted as 'Scene'. While a list of characters and/or a description of the staging may seem matter of fact and insignificant to the dialogue, they are not. Skimming over these initial descriptions, which unfortunately many students tend to do, will deny you an opportunity for significant insights into the characters, the staging, and, ultimately, the meaning.

As you read through the one-act play, *Trifles*, in its entirety, you will see that we have divided it into six Activity sections, some intertextual and TOK considerations, plus a collaboration exercise at the play's end. Each of these six sections will ask you questions that rely on your ability to close read. Jot down your responses in your learner portfolio and be prepared to share your findings with others.

Note: Observe bold elements as close reading details that are significant to the development of character, theme(s), verbal or dramatic irony, and/or dramatic strategies (entries/exits, props, lighting, sound, gesture, silence, movement/blocking, the passage of time).

TOK

What is the difference between reading a play (and imagining the actions on stage) and viewing a play (and actually watching scenes unfold)?

Trifles by Susan Glaspell

Characters

George Henderson, County Attorney

Lewis Hale, a neighboring farmer

Henry Peters, Sheriff

Mrs. Peters

Mrs. Hale

Scene: The kitchen in the now abandoned farmhouse of John Wright, a gloomy kitchen, and left without having been put in order—unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the breadbox, a dish towel on the table—other signs of incompleting work.

As the rear outer door opens, and the Sheriff comes in, followed by the County Attorney and Hale. The Sheriff and Hale are men in middle life, the County Attorney is a young man; all are much bundled up and go at once to the stove. They are followed by the two women—the Sheriff's wife first; she is a slight, wiry woman, a thin nervous face. Mrs. Hale is larger and would ordinarily be called more comfortable looking, but she is disturbed now and looks fearfully about as she enters. The women have come in slowly and stand close together near the door.

Activity 3 Focus on preliminary staging information

In the opening sentence, Glaspell's choice of language triggers a tone: words like 'abandoned', 'gloomy', and 'unwashed', coupled with incompleting actions, establish that tone. How would you characterise this tone? What might Glaspell be suggesting with the use of the word 'now'?

In the remaining five sentences of the scene, what does Glaspell manage to establish about the characters, either directly (stated) or indirectly (implied)? Note the positioning of these two women and three men on the stage. Can we infer anything about them from their places on stage? What do you think the playwright is trying to communicate through these detailed descriptions?

To what extent are both research and imagination necessary in designing an accurate representation of a play?

TOK

Connections

When filmmaker Sally Heckel remade the short story version of Glaspell's play into a 30-minute Oscar nominated film in 1980, she had this to say about the kitchen described in the text: 'I considered the kitchen to be another character in the film, more than just a background. Its atmosphere and the objects in it had to create a mood and reveal their own story. Very little has been recorded about the way poor rural people lived at that time, and even less about their kitchens. I was able to find a few illustrations, but photographs were virtually non-existent. Much of the information came from people's reminiscences, and from letters in women's magazines from that era.'