



Interlochen
ONLINE

ACTING BASICS

Study Guide



A Guide to Script Analysis:

BRINGING YOUR CHARACTER TO LIFE

By Keith Contreras-McDonald, Interlochen Online Course Instructor

Learn how to prepare for an audition through the process of script analysis. This guide, excerpted from the four-week Interlochen Online course “Acting Basics,” by Keith Contreras-McDonald, gives you the step-by-step approach you need to understand your character and bring it to life for stage or screen.

Script analysis is the process of reading and studying a script in detail to get a deep understanding of its story, characters, and setting. This analysis reveals the characters' objectives, motivations, and obstacles. The information you uncover helps you imagine how the character would think, move, and behave in the given circumstances.

When it comes down to it, almost every story involves the same basic things: a character wants something, something gets in their way, and they try different tactics to get what they want. Almost all stories are built on the conflict that arises when a character goes for what they want despite obstacles. You analyze the script because it helps you really understand the ins and outs of that challenge.

Asking Key Questions

There are many ways to analyze a script, but all of them involve reading it over and over, each time digging a little deeper to discover the treasures the writer has left. Here are the first two steps in a stepwise approach to follow:

Step 1. Read the whole script, in one sitting if at all possible, to give you a sense of the overarching story, as well as its general feel, tone, and style. Reserve judgment; don't think too much about whether you like it or you don't. Just read it.

Step 2. Read it again, this time paying close attention to detail and asking questions of the script. Most importantly, what are the given circumstances?

To help define the given circumstances, ask questions of your character in this second reading:

Who am I? Ask pointed questions. It's not just "I'm a farmer." What kind of person are you as that farmer? What adjectives describe your character's personality? What is your background? What are you afraid of? What do you like? What do you believe?

Where am I? Where is the action taking place? In public or private? Is it hot or cold? Indoors or outdoors? People act differently in different places. Sometimes you will find these answers in the script directions, but not always. Pay attention to the clues. How do the characters speak? Is there an obvious dialect or way of speaking that suggests a certain location, community, or timeframe?

What do I want? Why do I want it? The character's wants are known as **OBJECTIVES**.

- Characters have a **super-objective**—what do they want more than anything else in the world? This is a primal, basic human need that never changes. **EXAMPLES:** My mother's approval. My family's safety. Security. Revenge. Freedom.
- They also have **micro-objectives**. What are they looking for in a given scene, or even in a given moment? This is what your character wants to get from another person. This can change frequently, mid-scene, or even from beat to beat. **EXAMPLES:** To get my girlfriend to come back. To get hired. To trick my friend into attending an event. To get a friend to mind their own business.

When is the action taking place? In what time frame? Also, when do I get my objective?
EXAMPLES: A historic period in time. A city or a small town. Time of year. Season.
Time of day.

How do I get it?/What will I do? This is known as your tactic. Your tactic is an action verb. What will you do and how will you act, to get what you want? If you don't get it, then what does your character NOT do?

What are my obstacles? What or who is in the way of getting what you want?

What do I want the other characters in the scene to do?

What is my arc? That is, how does my character change? Where do I start and where do I end up?

Understanding the Writer

Now you've read your script twice. Guess what the next step is?

Step 3. READ IT AGAIN. This time, look closely at what the writer is telling you both overtly and by implication.

By the time a published script has made it to you, a writer has spent a painstaking amount of time on every single word and every bit of punctuation. Take those words very seriously and learn from them. Here's how:

Word choice: Trust the writer. Ask yourself why the character is using certain words. Notice the verbs. What does that tell you about the character? For example, why are they saying they are "tired" instead of "exhausted"?

Punctuation marks are like signposts. Exclamation points, question marks, commas, dashes, or ellipses (dot-dot-dots) create pauses and make rhythm. They are the writer's subtext, indicating that something should happen. Short sentences may indicate tension. Lots of commas may indicate heavy emotion requiring lots of pauses. Long, run-on sentences may indicate confusion. Looking for subtext is especially important in television and film, because script pages tend to be sparse.

Structure. How is the scene or monologue structured? What is the writing style? Long paragraphs or short? Lots of description or very little?

Style. Is the author writing in a dialect, or in a particular time period? Is the script realistic or fantastical? Sometimes it helps to read other works by the same scriptwriter to further understand their style.

Stage or set directions are instructions placed in the text, indicating technical elements, such as actor movement, position, or tone, or anything about sound effects and lighting. Stage or set directions often tell you what a character looks like and where they are to move. Some scripts have lots of direction, while others, such those written by Shakespeare, have very little direction, mostly because he was typically acting in or directing his own pieces.

Find the beats. Beats refer to a change. Every time you change what you are feeling or thinking, or every time you pause, move a new direction, have a realization, or try a new tactic: those are beats. Where do they happen? Are they long or short?

Your Turn!

Script analysis gives you the foundation you need to develop a unique and nuanced approach to building and acting as your character. This thorough review may seem like a lot, but it's worth it! All that you do to understand the script will bring your character to life and set you apart from the other actors auditioning for the same roles as you.

SCORING THE SCRIPT

Scoring a script means to mark it up so that you make specific choices about how you are going to perform a character. Scoring a script forces us to slow down and make deliberate choices. Common marks you will see in a script include the following, but there are no hard and fast rules.

- / = **beat, change**
- // = **beat, short pause**
- /// = **beat, long pause**
- > = **emphasis**
- = **define this word**
- O = **circle the verbs**

Generally, when you score a script, you write your character's intention for a scene at the top of the page where the monologue starts. You then identify the beats in the monologue, and write your tactics or actions next to the lines or beats you will use them in.

Underline important words that you will emphasize or inflect to deliver a certain emotion, and then mark inflections: low/high voice, fast/slow talk. Scored scripts also often include blocking, indicating how you will move on stage or set. You also notice words or terms you don't understand and write those definitions in the margins.

Instructor Bio



Meet the Course Instructor

KEITH CONTRERAS-MCDONALD

Originally from San Antonio, Texas, Keith Contreras-McDonald graduated from The Juilliard School's Drama division as a member of Group 35. In addition to his education from Juilliard, Keith trained with the Upright Citizens Brigade (101-401 & Musical Improv). His regional theatre credits include *Pablo Del Valle* at Arizona Theatre Company; *Dracula* and *Usnavi* at the Zach Theatre of Austin, *Usnavi* at the Lyric Theatre of Oklahoma; *Edward II* at MOCA Chicago and *Red Cat* Los Angeles dir. Sam Gold; *A Midsummer Nights Dream* at MOCA Chicago and *Red Cat* Los Angeles dir. Joe Dowling; *The Imaginary Invalid* at Shakespeare Theatre

of D.C. dir. Keith Baxter; *Hope: Part II of a Mexican Trilogy* with Center Theatre Group and the Latino Theatre Company of Los Angeles; *Blue Man Group* at Briar Street Theatre in Chicago; and *Bella: An American Tale* at Sundance Musical Theatre Lab dir. Robert O'Hara (Workshop). Keith Contreras-McDonald's TV work includes a recurring role on *Law and Order SVU*, and guest spots on *FBI*, *High Maintenance*, *Go On*, *The Electric Company*, *Medium*, *CSI: Miami*, *Metro* dir. Stephen Gaghan, and has been a principal performer in over a dozen national commercials and industrials for major brands and retailers.

ACTING BASICS

Learn more about developing a character for stage or screen, and connect with peers from around the world who are also interested in acting, by taking the four-week “**Acting Basics**” course developed by Keith Contreras-McDonald.

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