

INTERPRETING THE CHARACTER'S LINES

Assignment due:

Time Limits: 3-5 minutes

Activity Sheet: Fill out the special form at the end of this chapter. Tear it out and hand it to your instructor when you read your scene.

IMPORTANT WORDS TO NOTICE IN THIS ASSIGNMENT

Ad-lib	Form	Sub-meaning
Content	Motivating desire	Theme
Cues	Plot	Topping
Focus	"Pointing"	

BACKGROUND NOTES

Line interpretation is vitally important to you as an actor, for it is mainly through dialogue that the actor communicates the dramatist's purpose to the audience. Effective line interpretation demands that you have an active mind to understand the relationships of ideas and emotions in the play and a well trained voice to express those thoughts and feelings. As a pre-requisite for this chapter you will be wise to re-read Chapter 12 on "Improving Voice," and put its principles into practice.

Regardless of whether your part is a meaty lead or a thin bit, you are obligated to achieve three aims: (1) Lines must arouse audience belief (2) Lines must have spontaneity (3) Lines must be heightened for desired effects. Let us see how you can meet these demands.

In order to make dialogue sound believable, you must incorporate the same mental process on stage that you use in everyday conversation. Your talk with friends is genuine because you formulate the ideas and words as you speak. You are convincing when you communicate your own thoughts for your mind is at work. But memorize another person's words and they often sound stilted and artificial. Why? Because you have failed to provide the mental activity necessary to convey belief. Since dialogue is the dramatist's creation, the actor must learn to re-create the thoughts in his memorized lines so that they sound as his own. Be-

As you approach the content of your lines you will be concerned with communicating the factual meaning. You will want to study your script in a method similar to that used by the oral reader (see Chapter 13). You should understand the denotative and connotative values of all words. You should divide your speeches into thought groups, or words that are fused together into a single idea. For example, when you say "The big white house" you should convey the single idea rather than the separate words, "the," "big," "white," "house."

You will also need to "point" certain ideas, or provide emphasis within your thought groups. Generally following dialogue from *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde, the words underlined could be effectively emphasized. See if you can determine why:

Lady Bracknell. Are your parents living?

Jack. I have lost both my parents.

Lady Bracknell. Both? That seems like carelessness. Who was your father?

Jack. I am afraid I really don't know. The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me. I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was--well, I was found.

As you emphasize main ideas, you must subordinate those of less importance. Words such as "to," "in," "of," "a," etc. need subordination. So do words that have been previously mentioned, and those that carry obvious meanings such as "wet" rain (rain always is). Also, provide oral punctuation between thought groups by using pause for emphasis and suspense.

In addition to communicating thought as you deliver dialogue, you must also project your character's attitudes and emotions. Generally a character's attitude reveals relationships within the play more than his words. Lines are not separate entities. They relate to the play as a whole, furthering the dramatist's theme. They relate to the particular scene they are in, as well as to the character's purpose. With these associations in mind determine why your character says each line. What is his motivation? What are his feelings behind the line?

Every line has at least two meanings. There is the factual surface meaning that is usually evident at a glance. But like an iceberg that carries much of its weight beneath the water, lines carry emotional sub-meanings hidden below the surface. For example, the surface meaning of the following lines is evident:

Bill. It's raining.
Mary. I know.
But the lines lack real meaning until we understand their relationship to the play's action and to the character's desire or feelings. In one play the speakers may have needed rain desperately, and the lines indicate:

Bill. Our prayers have been answered!

Mary. Our crops will grow!

In another play Bill and Mary may be in a flooded area, and the lines suggest:

Bill. Our lives are in danger.

Mary. We'll be trapped!

Again, the play may be a light whimsy where Bill is asking Mary out, and the rain lines mean:

Bill. Do you really want to go with me?

Mary. Sure do!

As you look for the sub-meaning, determine your character's motivating desire, or what he wants from having said the line. In the first example, Bill's motivating desire when he says "It's raining," and means "Our prayers have been answered," is to give divine thanks. When he means "Our lives are in danger," his desire is to get away from the flood, and when he means "Do you really want to go?" his desire is to take Mary for a walk.

Whenever you say a line be sure you communicate the sub-meaning, realizing your character's desire in having spoken. Understand the relationship of your lines not only to the immediate situation, but to the circumstances that happened before the scene.

Up to now we have been concerned with the content of lines--what they say intellectually and emotionally. Of equal importance to interpretation is the form of the dialogue, or how the character expresses his ideas. Form takes into consideration the grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, articulation, and length of sentences. Form reveals much about the character. For example, a person who states, "He sez I ain't gonna buy no hat now," and the one who says, "It has been brought to my attention that I shall be unable to procure a chapeau at the moment," may mean the same thing (content), but the form provides the difference and sets the character.

As an actor you must discover your character's background, influences, likes, dislikes, etc. in order to understand why your character speaks as he does. Only when you have justified his manner of speech, will you be able to convincingly project his personality.

Remember, to arouse audience belief in the dialogue you must project your lines with spontaneity. Avoid the rut of sounding mechanical. Strive always to have your speeches appear fresh and new, as though you are saying them for the first time. Your success here will greatly depend upon your feeling and thinking within the part.

While we have indicated that lines need a natural, conversational quality, we do not mean that they should be exactly like normal conversation. Stage lines must be clearer and more interesting than in real life, and they must project to the audience. The following techniques will assist you in heightening lines and in handling special problems:

Preparing for Cues. Cues are the last few words of the actor's speech that precede your lines. Sometimes a certain sound or movement will be your cue, such as a knock on the door, but generally your cue is the speech that precedes yours. In order to "pick up your cues" in time, you should learn to take a breath before the other person has stopped talking, so you are ready to immediately begin your lines.

Picking up Cues. Most plays demand a fast pick up of cues. This means that there should be no pause between the end of one character's speech and the beginning of another character's speech. Quick pick up of

cues provides a tempo which holds interest. Within the speech, of course, rate should be varied according to idea and emotion.

Anticipating cues. Never anticipate cues. Picking up the phone before it rings, or crying two seconds before you learn of grandpa's death makes your acting ludicrous.

Interrupted sentences. When the script indicates an interrupted sentence, practice cutting in on the other person's speech until your timing is accurate. If someone is to cut in on your speech, prepare to finish the sentence, in case the cue is late and your speech is not interrupted.

Topping. Topping lines provides a build to the climactic part in the scene. To top means to say each line faster, stronger, and with a higher pitch than the preceding line. The secret of topping is to start at a level low enough to permit building to the climax. The following scene from Moliere's The Imaginary Invalid calls for topping of lines:

Toinette. What does your doctor prescribe for your diet?
Argan. He lets me eat soup.

Toinette. Stupidity!

Argan. Chicken.

Toinette. Chicamery!

Argan. Beet.

Toinette. Baloney!

Argan. Fresh eggs and Italian cheese.

Toinette. Ignorantus, ignorantus, ignorantum!

Ad-lib. Ad-lib means to make up your own words and business. Ad-lib is used to cover up mistakes on stage such as when an actor forgets a speech or makes a late entrance. Of course ad-libbing should be used only in emergencies, and then should be given in full voice and with confidence so that it does not sound like ad-libbing.

Calling off stage. Be sure you mentally picture the distance and increase your volume and force to account for that distance.

Stage Whisper. Use strong diaphragmatic breathing, a low pitch, and little voice to project the whispered effect.

Laughing. Laughing requires expelling the air stream in explosive spurts from the region of the diaphragm. To keep your lines from being blurred, laugh only between lines or words. For technique on holding for laughs, see Chapter 19 on "Playing Humorous Scenes."

Crying. Inhale in little gasping sobs. Sob between words, rather than on them. Be sure that the "tears" are revealed in your voice. Don't get carried away, though. Deep grief will communicate more effectively if it is restrained.

ASSIGNMENT AND ITS PURPOSE

This assignment will give you practice in analyzing and presenting dialogue. You and a classmate are to prepare a 3-5 minute scene from a play and read it aloud to the class. You will be graded on how well you arouse belief, provide spontaneity, and handle special dialogue problems.

HOW TO PREPARE

1. You and your partner are to choose a two-character scene from a noted play. Decide which character you will be. Read the complete play, relating your scene to the whole. See Appendix C for scenes or choose your own scene. Consult the library for copies of complete plays or purchase and use one of the following paper back books:

Kozelka, Paul, ed. Fifteen American One-Act Plays. Washington Square Press, 1961 (630 Fifth Ave., New York, New York 10020).
Curt, Bennett, and Van Cartmell, eds. 24 Favorite One-Act Plays. Dolphin Company, 1958 (501 Franklin Ave., Garden City, New York 11531).
Zachar, Irwin, ed. Plays as Experience. Odyssey Press, 1962 (55 Fifth Ave., New York, New York 10003).



"Language springs out of the inmost parts of us. No glass renders a man's likeness so true as his speech." -- Ben Jonson

- Stickland, Cowles. The Technique of Acting. McGraw-Hill Company, 1956, on pointing, pp. 175-184.
- Spolin, Viola. Improvisation for the Theatre. Northwestern University Press, 1963; activity suggestions, pp. 180-183; 194-197.
- Sievers, David. Directing for the Theatre. William Brown Company, 1961, pp. 143-148.
- McGraw, Charles. Acting is Believing. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955, pp. 96-122.
- Goodman, Edward. Make Believe, The Art of Acting. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956, pp. 138-146 and 170-179.
- Dolman, John. The Art of Acting. Harper and Brothers, 1949, pp. 101-117.
- Cartmell, Van. Amateur Theatre. Van Nostrand Company, 1961, pp. 20-23; 31-33; 37-39.
- Albright, H.D. Working Up a Part. 2nd ed. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959, pp. 40-50.

BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR LINE INTERPRETATION

3. Rent and show the following film:
Dialogue, 30 minutes. Sound. Analyzes dialogue and discusses ways of giving it the best expression. Shows scenes from Othello, School for Scandal, Julius Caesar, and Cyano. Audio-Visual Instruction, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska 68508.
2. Find a soliloquy or long speech either in modern or classical drama. Analyze and interpret it for oral presentation. Title suggestions of plays with long speeches: Elizabeth the Queen, Mary of Scotland, Electra, Macbeth, Hamlet, Death of a Salesman, Our Town, Medea, J.B. The Lark, Noah, Glass Menagerie, The Miracle Worker.
1. Plan a Shakespearean program. Select short scenes from Shakespeare's plays for analysis and reading presentation. A list of Shakespearean scenes appears in Chapter 28, or consult Samuel Selden's Shakespeare: A Player's Handbook of Short Scenes. Holiday House, 1960.

ADDITIONAL PROJECTS FOR LINE INTERPRETATION

Read the scene with your partner. Be sure that you establish eye contact with your partner and the audience. Hold your script high enough to prevent head bobbing. When you are through with the scene, pause, and then return quietly to your desk.

When you are called upon, hand your activity sheet to your instructor and go to the playing area with your partner. Clearly and concisely introduce the scene.

HOW TO PRESENT

5. Practice reading the scene aloud, working for vocal audibility and flexibility. Now rehearse the scene seven or eight times with your partner. Work on picking up cues, building to the climax, etc. (Your instructor may give you class time for rehearsal.)
4. Plan a one-minute introduction in which you briefly relate the background events leading up to the scene you are giving. Decide which of you will give the introduction.
3. Work on the scene you will read aloud. Identify the general mood of the scene. Concentrate on understanding the factual meaning. Then concentrate on the sub-meaning and on your character's attitudes and desires. Fill in the activity sheet at the end of this chapter.
2. After you have read the complete play, condense the plot, or the play's story, into one sentence. Decide on the theme of the play, or the main idea that the dramatist is trying to project. Study your character. What kind of person is he mentally? emotionally? physically? How has his family, education, and environment influenced his ideas, feelings, and manner of speaking? What is this character's main purpose in the play? What are his basic wants or desires? (See Chapters 17 and 18.)