

Auditioning - Prepared Readings and Controlling The Time
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Unless you have a particularly famous parent in the business, the single most important thing for you to learn to do well is auditioning. While there is a great deal of overlap with performing, auditioning is very different and has its' own set of skills to learn and pitfalls to avoid. This article will focus on prepared and cold readings, where you are asked to read from a script for an audition. The term 'cold read' refers to those instances where you are asked to read a scene with little or no time to read the whole play or get off-book.

The first pitfall for many actors when they are auditioning is that they try to feel the same way they do when they are performing. Auditioning is an artificial form, and when actors don't feel the same way in auditions as they do in performance they often internalize it and think it is their fault and blame themselves for not 'acting.' So the first thing to turn around is to take the pressure off of yourself and accept that you do not have to feel like you feel when you're performing.

So, given that auditioning is an artificial form and feels different from performing, how do you create the sense of a performance at an audition, or a feeling for what you will do if they actually cast you? The main thing is to control the time. Controlling the time does not mean sitting down, smoking a cigarette and talking about the weather (this is called wasting the time). But most actors, inside of auditions, take on the energy of readers. For many reasons (nerves, fear, discomfort with being in a no-power situation), actors tend to read as fast as they can, burying their heads in the script and losing connection with their scene partner, even when they have the next line memorized.

But directors are not simply looking for people who can read well; they are looking for people who can bring the script to life by creating moments where audiences see discovery, reaction and interaction. This includes moments of silence or pausing to let moments land, or where you register a reaction. Silence and pausing are huge in auditions because actors are afraid to use them. The impact of an actor who has the confidence to take a pause and land the next line is enormous. If you rush through the text reading as fast as you can, you turn into a reader and lose the ability to create moments. Remember that casting people understand that you are doing a prepared reading, and while they may hope for a fully realized performance, what will make them cast you (or at least call you back for a further reading) is simply a moment or two where you show a particular color and they see where you are capable of going with the role with a full rehearsal period.

You should look for four moments in the first page and a half (they need to be in the first page and a half because you may not get further than that) where you are definitely going to control the time before you speak the next line. You then learn that next line so you don't have to look at the book when you deliver it, make a strong choice about how you are going affect the other person with what you say, and then in the audition make sure you do it. It is useful to make the first moment you choose within the first two lines so it can help ground you. It is a very different feeling when you give yourself the tools to start creating moments in an audition rather than reading. You will find controlling the time will relax you profoundly, far more than any relaxation exercises you might do before the audition.

An example of controlling the time might be a moment where something important is revealed to you in the scene. In reaction, you look the other person in the eye, turn to leave, and then decide to come back towards them, delivering the next line very close to them in a low voice. Or you can use a chair to accent a powerful moment of discovery by pausing, standing very still and then slowly sitting down at the moment your partner reveals the crucial information to you. Again, you should be off-book on the lines for these moments and not have to look at the script, or it will distract from the effect. Always choose moments that have weight in them. The most effective places tend to be those where important information is revealed, a major turning point is reached, or a decision is made.

Another way to describe 'controlling the time' is to think in terms of film. When you are looking at the script before the audition, imagine where would there be a close-up of your character in the edited version, and what your characters' reaction would be in that close-up. Then you play that moment before you say the next line. Thinking in film terms helps you find the moments that have weight in them.

Getting Off-Book and Cold Readings

You do not need to be completely or even mostly off-book to do a good reading, and many times that is impossible as you may only have a few moments to look at the script. In this case, quickly scan thru the first half-page of the script, and then the last half page. This will tell you where the scene or character ends up, so you can play how they change (their 'arc') from the beginning of the scene to the end. Then quickly scan the stage directions and look for essential

physical actions like slaps, kisses, entrances and exits. Finally, choose three or four places to control the time, (at least two in the first half-page), and quickly memorize the lines you speak immediately after these moments. With practice, this process can be done very quickly, and if you still have time you can then read the scene from beginning to end. Resist the temptation to read aloud with someone else who is at the audition until you have done this crucial preparation, or to socialize with friends who are at the audition.

Here are a few other techniques that can help you come in more prepared, connect with your scene partner, and let the auditors focus on you and your interaction with the other actors.

Hold the script very still when you are auditioning. It is distracting when actors rustle or wave the script around. Also, it breaks your hand-eye coordination, making it harder to find where you left off when you return your eyes to the page. If you keep the script still, it will disappear for the auditors and they will focus more on you and what is happening in the scene. Use your thumb to keep your place on the page. Highlighting your lines also helps. Some people like to enlarge the script with a photocopier so they don't have to squint or wear glasses. You should always keep the script in hand during a cold reading, even if you are completely off-book, or the auditors may feel that you are no longer doing a prepared reading and will expect a finished performance. Actors working without a script in hand also make everyone in the room worry that you will forget your lines, creating a very uncomfortable and distracting situation for all.

Never speak when you are looking at the page. Instead, look down, pick up (or 'steal') the line from the page, look at your scene partner and then say the line to them. Also, don't keep your eyes on the script when your partner is speaking. Rather than looking down to steal your line while they are speaking to you, stay with your partner with your eyes, letting what they say land on you. When they are finished, then look down for your line. This is particularly important for filmed auditions, where your reactions to the other person are often more important than the words you speak. You can also keep your head movement to a minimum when stealing lines if you practice moving only your eyes when looking down. Stealing the lines and keeping eye contact while speaking may slow down your cold readings at first, but if you practice this regularly you will get very fast at this, and eventually able to steal several lines at a time. Reading aloud to children is good practice for building up this skill - experiment with how much you can keep eye contact while reading a story to them. As with anything, these skills will become natural with practice. Particularly for auditioning, where nerves often come up, these techniques need to become habits that are in your body, so that you don't have to think about them during auditions.

If at all possible, get the play ahead of time and read it in its entirety. Call the theatre, casting director or your agent and find out what specific scenes you will be reading from. Offer to come to the theatre and pick up the play or scenes (agents will usually fax or e-mail this to you), or at least borrow them long enough to copy and bring right back. You may feel that you are being a nuisance by calling to get this information from busy casting people, but remember that they are very highly motivated to see you do your best work and solve their casting problems. It is in everybody's best interests to have you come in as prepared as possible and show what you are capable of doing.