

# Making the most of drama devices

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KS3/KS4

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## Introduction

'Devices' is the catch-all term used to describe any and every drama technique employed to create drama, interpret text, explore ideas, develop performance skills and create drama in original and compelling ways. They will be familiar to all drama teachers and to most students after only a very short time of learning in and through drama.

This scheme of six 90-minute sessions is designed as both refresher and pointer towards ways of cumulatively using a host of techniques in the drama studio, which will widen drama vocabulary and strengthen the students' toolbox whether they are devising or performing text.

Lighting, sound, special effects and video imaging are not specifically addressed in this scheme, but of course these are also valid devices.

### Learning objectives

At the end of this scheme learners will have:

- ▶ Developed their repertoire of drama devices and their vocabulary
- ▶ Understood how devices and techniques produce dramatic effects
- ▶ Worked collaboratively to improve drama skills
- ▶ Explored a range of ideas and concepts.

### The sessions

#### Session 1: Strong starts, convincing endings

Without these, drama can be vague and half-hearted. Point of View and passing the baton help make a credible piece.

#### Session 2: One move speaks a thousand words

Like a picture, physicality conveys more than mere words, coupled with mime, gesture, proxemics, body language and still images.

#### Session 3: The great instrument

The human voice is a powerful tool; conscience tunnels are visually effective too.

#### Session 4: Lifeblood of the drama

Characters are the essence of a good story; with backstory, props and semiotics.

#### Session 5: The wonderful story

Plot is not everything, but a good one driven by characters helps, with transitions, cross-cutting and flashbacks/forwards.

#### Session 6: Play it again, Sam

Testing the learning with a performance to an audience.

### Resources

Suggested assessment sheets for the range of available dramatic devices.

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Photo by Stahlneet

All drama devices are useful when applied appropriately and exploited effectively.

### Sensitivities

Teachers will be aware of the need to deal sensitively with some of the issues this scheme may raise. It may be necessary to monitor some students' approach to these issues.

### Stretches and challenges

Each session has a stretch and challenge exercise which can be either incorporated into a group piece or done separately. Challenges shouldn't apply only to the more able.

### Groupings

The same groupings should work throughout the scheme, with Sam changing each session, and others changing characters each time or staying the same and evolving their personalities.

### Collaboration

Collaboration is essential in almost all drama work and the scheme works on the basis that students collaborate continuously to create and improve and assess their work and that of others.

### Reflection

Time should be set aside for reflection, which allows both students and teachers to consider what's been achieved, learned, needs improvement and how to make the changes necessary.

## Session 1: Strong starts, convincing endings

### Learning objectives

By the end of the session students will have:

- ▶ Developed skills in using starts/finishes, baton passing, Point of View
- ▶ Understood how these devices and techniques produce dramatic effects
- ▶ Worked collaboratively to improve drama skills
- ▶ Explored a range of ideas and concepts.

### Warm-up (20 mins)

- a) In small groups devise a short scene which opens with someone saying: 'So how are you going to explain that?'
- b) Same groups, start with the discovery of a dead pet on the floor.
- c) Same with final line, 'I've had enough; you deal with it, good luck!'

### Discussion and new learning (20 mins)

- a) *Strong starts*: Why are they important? How can we make sure we have a strong start? What dramatic devices could we use? Blackouts, loud noises, conflict, tears, other emotion, performers emerging from audience, forced argument within audience itself?
- b) *Convincing endings*. Why are they important? How can we end on a high note which will tell the audience we're done, answer questions, wrap up loose ends, convey a message or give purpose to the piece we've presented?
- c) What does 'dramatic point of view' mean? For example, if this moment now were a piece of drama, whose story do we want the audience to grasp – mine as the teacher, or you, X, daydreaming about what you had for breakfast? The POV is vital to help us focus and direct our drama. Sometimes characters are small bit players in the drama of a central one. POV allows us to express opinions, sometimes controversial or uncomfortable, that the audience may or may not agree with. Often in life, a person/character has to change his/her POV when facing changed circumstances, more information or problems that have arisen.
- d) *Baton passing*: ask if everyone is familiar with how it works in running races. Well, it works too in drama. A story, a piece of information, a secret, a lie, a prop may be passed on from one person to another to develop both plot and character.

Try it, with the whole class as one group: volunteer enters the scene and finds a dirty bag, looks in and then makes or persuades the second person to take it from him/her, and so on.

Now try with a different order of characters; the first one spreads a lie to the second, who passes it to third and so on.

### Developments (20 mins)

Remembering that POV, baton passing and strong openings and convincing endings are drama devices that will help develop good drama, ask students to work in groups of 4/5, with one character who is called Sam (male or female).

Create a one-off scene in which it's Sam's birthday and he/she is anxious about a 'surprise party' arranged by friends. It's from Sam's POV; information and/or a prop must be passed like a baton in the scene to aid the plot and it must have this opening line, 'Happy birthday, Sam? Yeah, right,' and this closing line, 'Happy birthday, Sam, how was it for you?'

For this exercise they may mostly play teenagers, but must include one person who is not of their age.

To develop the characters and plot, the following is a list of possible outcomes:

- ▶ There is no party
- ▶ An unwelcome guest turns up
- ▶ An inappropriate present is given
- ▶ Sam is ill or taken ill during it
- ▶ Somebody hates Sam powerfully.

### Work in progress (25 mins)

Share and show selected parts of groups' work.

### Reflection (5 mins)

Teacher assesses each group on how well devices were used and how they enhanced the development of the piece. Invite students to suggest ways of improving their own and each other's pieces.

### Previous schemes

It's worth checking my schemes of work on *Teacher-in-Role as a Drama Device* (*Teaching Drama*, Spring 2, 2017/18) and on *Being the Director* (*Teaching Drama*, Spring 1, 2016/17) for specific ideas relating to and guiding the teacher on a wide range of drama devices and techniques.

### Resources

- ▶ *Icebreaker games*; adaptable ideas, including passing the baton: <http://gamesforgroups.com/crazygames.html>
- ▶ *What is dramatic point of view?*; discussion on approaches for teachers: <http://ingrundsundberg.com/2011/04/05/what-is-dramatic-point-of-view/>

### Importance of narrators

Narrators are useful drama devices and using one can often assist with POV and passing the baton moments, by explaining to the audience what they must know. They can be in role or simply be narrators.

### Stretch and challenge

Ask one student to devise and perform a monologue that starts and ends with the line, 'You may think that about me, but I don't care.' One prop may be used from a gun, a mask, a beer, a document or a car key.

### Useful quotation

'The most fatal illusion is the settled point of view. Since life is growth and motion, a fixed point of view kills anybody who has one.' (Brooks Atkinson)

**Research at home**

Find a scene from a play text or a TV programme that could be replayed by a group without words, uses pure physicality, but still conveys some meaning.

**Session 2: One move speaks a thousand words****Learning objectives**

By the end of the session students will have:

- ▶ Developed skills in mime, still image, proxemics, physicality
- ▶ Understood how these devices and techniques produce dramatic effects
- ▶ Worked collaboratively to improve drama skills
- ▶ Explored a range of ideas and concepts.

**Warm-up (20 mins)**

- a) In pairs. A sculpts B into three still images telling a story of a mishap and they agree captions for each one.
- b) In pairs. Two characters demonstrate a range of emotions about each other, from love to hatred, by using proxemics, closeness.
- c) In pairs, work out a mime sequence that tells the story of the last exercise without using words.

**Discussion and new learning (20 mins)**

Ask students if they've heard the expression, 'a picture paints a thousand words?' One graphic visual image is often far more effective than many words. It's the same with *movement*. Good *physicality* in drama can be more memorable for the audience than mere words.

We should know about *mime and gesture*. Ask for examples of students demonstrating mimed anger, mimed hunger, mimed anxiety. Add speech from realistic characters and we have drama. Put the mimes occasionally into still images, perhaps with captions, and we have interesting drama.

*Proxemics* is the art in theatre of expressing meaning according to the space between characters (I love you, I hate you, I'm afraid of you). The space between actors and audience can also be used to reinforce particular meanings.

We should also mention *body language*. The attitude of a character need not be confined to the spoken word. The way he/she stands, walks, sits, eats, drinks, looks at people, responds to questions or relates to other people, communicates to an audience in a powerful way.

**Developments (20 mins)**

Work in the same groups as last session, with *either* the same or a different student playing Sam (male or female). Groups must bear in mind what they created last session on and around Sam's birthday party.

The story must now move into a more abstract phase (such as a dream, a hazy flashback, an unsettling moment, a mental difficulty) to put Sam in a place where their enemies are having a deep effect on them and others.

Groups should decide if they want to include any of last session's devised material for this work, particularly the idea of character baton passing, the particular Point of View and the strong opening and convincing ending.

This session they need to include at least three still images, more physicality than words, and a clear use of proxemics to convey a message.

**Work in progress (25 mins)**

Share and show selected parts of groups' work.

**Reflection (5 mins)**

Peer and self assessment on how well devices were used and how they enhanced the development of the piece.

**Research at home**

Research a speech by a famous person that is so effective the speaker does not need to be seen delivering it.

**Resources**

- ▶ Actors and Performers, proxemics: <https://actorsandperformers.com/actors/advice/74/professional-life/directing>
- ▶ BBC Bitesize, still images, simple explanation: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/drama/exploring/explorative\\_strategiesrev1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/drama/exploring/explorative_strategiesrev1.shtml)
- ▶ Theatrefolk, developing physicality: <https://www.theatrefolk.com/blog/developing-your-characters-physicality-from-head-to-toe/>

**Importance of narrators**

Narrators do not have to be played by the same student; the role can be circulated in a Brechtian style or shared by several, as in a Greek chorus.

**Stretch and challenge**

Invite one student or pair to devise and perform a short interpretative movement/dance piece showing Sam's state of mind at a particular point, with or without music.

**Useful quotation**

'What you do speaks so loud that I cannot hear what you say.' (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

## Session 3: The great instrument

### Learning objectives

By the end of the session students will have:

- ▶ Developed skills in using voice(s), conscience tunnels, effects
- ▶ Understood how these devices and techniques produce dramatic effects
- ▶ Worked collaboratively to improve drama skills
- ▶ Explored a range of ideas and concepts.

### Warm-up (20 mins)

- a) In pairs, experiment with voice levels, pitch and pace to have an argument that starts quiet, builds and falls away.
- b) In small groups, make a short commentary on another person's behaviour in choral, merged, overlapping speech.
- c) Same groups; put one with a dilemma in the middle of conflicting voices of advice whispering in his/her ear.

### Discussion and new learning (20 mins)

Of all the instruments we can play – from manufactured musical ones to found junk – the *human voice* is the most versatile, possessing the greatest potential to evoke emotions in others ranging from thrill to boredom.

Invite students to share examples of when a voice might excite people or when it might send them to sleep.

Added to the earlier devices such as still images, proxemics, physicality, mime, baton passing and a particular POV, then we have effective drama.

*Greek chorus*: ask if students know what that is. It's a group performance of text, using vocal contrasts and harmonies to convey meaning.

*Conscience, decision or thought alley or tunnel* is a device to physicalise a dilemma, a major problem or a struggle a character has. It might be at the life and death, right versus wrong end of the scale, or be a simple doubt about somebody's comments. It physicalizes voices in a way that speaking lines doesn't.

### Developments (20 mins)

Work in the established groups, with *either* the same or a different student playing Sam. Groups must bear in mind what they created in the previous two sessions from specific devices.

Sam now faces a dilemma, an evenly-balanced problem, and must make a choice. Whichever is chosen will have consequences for Sam and some of those around him/her.

Vary other characters in the group, but keep Sam constant.

Use a thought/conscience tunnel and use a choral speech moment (either from narrators or not) to reinforce what is inside Sam's mind.

### Work in progress (25 mins)

Share and show selected parts of groups' work.

### Reflection (5 mins)

Invite peer assessment and comment in pairs, especially if each partner has a slightly different perspective on the effectiveness of using the devices.

### Research at home

Write a 150-word description of a character for the Sam story with a sense of a backstory which is unstable, uncomfortable but credible. Choose and/or find one prop to enhance the character.

### Resources

- ▶ Drama Toolkit, voice exercises and games: <http://www.dramatoolkit.co.uk/drama-games/category/voice-and-dialogue>
- ▶ The Drama Teacher, words describing performance voice: <http://www.thedramateacher.com/words-used-to-describe-voice-in-performance/>
- ▶ Drama Resource, Conscience Alley: <https://dramaresource.com/conscience-alley/>

### Importance of narrators

They can speak while others cannot; they are variously the voice(s) of the author, protagonist, antagonist, hero, villain, victim or fly on the wall.

### Stretch and challenge

Invite a student to prepare and perform a pompous speech as at a public meeting after events have got out of hand in Sam's situation and officialdom has 'lessons to learn'.

### Useful quotation

'A clear conscience is the sure sign of a bad memory.' (Mark Twain)

## Session 4: Lifeblood of the drama

### Learning objectives

By the end of the session students will have:

- ▶ Developed skills in using characters, backstories, props, semiotics
- ▶ Understood how these devices and techniques produce dramatic effects
- ▶ Worked collaboratively to improve drama skills
- ▶ Explored a range of ideas and concepts.

### Warm-up (20 mins)

- a) In pairs, devise a moment when the character of an imaginary third person is described so he/she is believable.
- b) In pairs, agree character backstories and enter under the influence of them, show something and leave.
- c) In pairs, repeat the above using a prop that further signs to the audience something about the third person.

### Discussion and new learning (20 mins)

Teacher asks students to describe the process and outcomes of some characters they've created in drama. Nobody starts life as a completely blank sheet – even a baby has a *backstory* of its time in the womb and its delivery which have helped to shape it. We all carry baggage from the past that make us what we are and will become.

Equally, nobody lives entirely unaffected by others around them.

This is part of character development, and we know that no story works without being driven by the characters in it. It may be that *props* and costumes, space, levels and lighting, sound effects and music help show that character to an audience, but it's the inner heart that drives the performance.

If a performer *multiroles*, plays more than one part, a decision must be made whether the actor demonstrates the parts like putting on a coat or really gets deeply into each and feels the pain within.

*Semiotics* are signs pointing the audience in the direction of interpretation. A gun carried by a character, or a bloodied shirt they are wearing, tells us something. An empty cupboard when people are hungry tells us something else.

Many signs around us are used unconsciously. A no-entry sign sends a clear signal about direction of travel. Signs in drama may be obvious or subtle. Or both.

### Developments (20 mins)

Work in the groups, with Sam (male or female) and characters who have mainly not been seen so far in this project. Groups must bear in mind what they created in the previous three sessions from specific devices and should include as many as are appropriate.

Sam is now going on a journey, encountering a succession of people who may be helpful or not. The journey is driven by the need to do the right thing, to correct past mistakes and to save somebody who matters.

It may be a physically mimed journey or be acted by others and told by narration or could be a combination. It must include fully credible characters in each situation with plausible backstories and enough semiotics and signs to direct the audience to the destination the groups wants.

### Work in progress (25 mins)

Share and show selected parts of groups' work.

### Reflection (5 mins)

Invite one student to assess the work of one individual in another group, noting particularly how effective was his/her use of drama devices.

### Research at home

Storyboard a small drama in which A meets B and falls in love. C is jealous and spoils everything, leaving A and/or B with an unhappy/happy outcome.

### Resources

- ▶ *Primary Resources*, characterisation PowerPoint, useful introduction/recap: [www.primaryresources.co.uk](http://www.primaryresources.co.uk)
- ▶ *BBC Bitesize English*, characterisation and voice: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english/extendedreading/characterisationandvoicerev1.shtml>
- ▶ *Sign Salad*, Semiotics explained: <http://www.signsalad.com/semiotics-explained/>

### Importance of narrators

They can report on events and people in the first or third person and can be the friend of the audience, their confidant, or they can stir the audience up and create controversy, as required.

### Stretch and challenge

Invite selected students needing more support to choose how they would like to play Sam. Help develop a set of personality traits and encourage each group to work round those parameters.

### Useful quotation

'Great fiction is fuelled by bad decisions and human weakness.' (Kristin Lamb)

## Session 5: The wonderful story

### Learning objectives

By the end of the session students will have:

- ▶ Developed skills in using character-driven plot, transitions, flash forwards/backwards, cross-cutting
- ▶ Understood how these devices and techniques produce dramatic effects
- ▶ Worked collaboratively to improve drama skills
- ▶ Explored a range of ideas and concepts.

### Warm-up (20 mins)

- a) In small groups devise a 60-second sequence just before, during and just after a robbery.
- b) Same groups, cross-cut the scenes for dramatic effect and repeat.
- c) Same groups; experiment with how to transition between scenes.

### Discussion and new learning (20 mins)

Teacher asks: when a good story about real characters is told, where to start? Where's the beginning? Is there an end? Invite students to think of films they have seen that don't start at the chronological beginning.

To change the order for dramatic impact is called *cross-cutting*.

To show a short piece of a character's past in *flashback* can add something to the audience's understanding of the person. To *flash-forwards* is to take an imaginary leap ahead, again to add interest.

Forwards or back may be a glimpse of a dream/nightmare or a big fear.

A good *plot* is generally assumed to be in three parts: beginning, middle and end, but that is restrictive. Is the plot – boy/girl meets boy/girl; boy/girl loses boy/girl; boy/girl finds boy/girl again – enough? It may be.

In exam terms, there are no marks for plot. Characters living in the plot count.

*Transitions* are the process of moving from scene to scene, including flashbacks and flash forwards– black outs, walking off/on, adding a comic interlude, song or monologue, narration to link plot. Ask students how best to transition between their scenes.

### Developments (20 mins)

In same groups, absorbing many of the devices considered so far, add two new scenes to the Sam story – one in the past and one in the future – and cross-cut the order to suit the drama. Think about how to transition between all scenes created so far to give clarity and purpose for the audience.

Make sure the plot is consistent, but spend more time checking the credibility of the characters in the plot.

### Work in progress (25 mins)

Share and show selected parts of groups' work.

### Reflection (5 mins)

Teacher invites selected students to assess themselves and the rest of their group in terms of how effectively drama devices have been used.

### Research at home

Make notes on how to shape the material so far in the Sam story and the devices successfully used, with a view to presenting a performance to others. What needs to be cut out or change?

### Resources

- ▶ The Magnificent 7 Plot Points: <https://www.keepwriting.com/tsc/magnificent7plotpoints.htm>
- ▶ Buzzle, The Elements of Drama: <https://www.buzzle.com/articles/elements-of-drama.html>
- ▶ Drama Resource, flashbacks and flash-forwards: <https://dramaresource.com/flashbacks-and-flash-forwards/>
- ▶ Katherine's Blog, Transitions: <http://blogs.yis.ac.jp/15robidouk/2012/10/07/drama-journal-transitions-in-devised-pieces-and-image-theatre/>
- ▶ BBC Bitesize, cross-cutting: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/drama/exploring/explorative\\_strategiesrev5.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/drama/exploring/explorative_strategiesrev5.shtml)

### Importance of narrators

Narrators should never be an add-on in devising. If needed, they're needed from the outset and should be part of the process, often adding a number of alternative POVs and roles.

### Stretch and challenge

Invite a student to prepare a plot development that is used by their group to change direction, make better use of a particular device or surprise the audience.

### Useful quotation

*'Pictures flashed on her in sudden colour, too much colour, shocking colour, the colour that leaps out of black when lightning strikes at night.'*  
(Thomas Harris)

## Session 6: Play it again, Sam

### Learning objectives

By the end of the session students will have:

- ▶ Tested skills in using drama devices through a shared performance
- ▶ Understood how these devices and techniques produce dramatic effects
- ▶ Worked collaboratively to improve drama skills
- ▶ Explored a range of ideas and concepts.

### Warm-up (20 mins)

The warm-up should be a run through of the material each group has devised, making editing/directorial decisions to prepare a performance, being aware it must contain as many devices as possible.

### Discussion and reminder (10 mins)

Each group is to share a performance of all or part of their Sam story, incorporating the devices. If there is sufficient time, a full session could be devoted to editing, rehearsing and further refining before another is given to performance, if it's not to be shared outside lesson time.

### Performances (as much time as is available)

Each group performs as determined by the teacher. One idea is to cross-cut group sharing, so audience sees the openings, the middles and then the endings.

### Reflection

The teacher assesses (based on exam criteria if appropriate) each student's effective use of drama devices, performance skills, collaboration and willingness to go beyond their comfort zone.

### Importance of narrators

Narrators could be recorded on video and played back as needed during the actual performance, depending on technical resources available.

### Stretch and challenge

Ask selected students to prepare 30-second monologues or 60-second duologues pairing different abilities in the Sam role, a narrator role or as a minor character to give them more to contribute.

### Useful quotation

*'The only really good performance is the one where you make yourself vulnerable, while pushing beyond your familiar comfort zone.'* (Kim Gordon)

# RESOURCES

A selection of drama devices

**Multiroling:**

What is the purpose of this device?

How did we use it in our drama piece?

How did it improve what we did?

What would I have done differently if there was more time?

**Mime and gesture:**

What is the purpose of this device?

How did we use it in our drama piece?

How did it improve what we did?

What would I have done differently if there was more time?



**Vocal techniques:**

What is the purpose of this device?

How did we use it in our drama piece?

How did it improve what we did?

What would I have done differently if there was more time?

**Flashbacks/flash-forwards:**

What is the purpose of this device?

How did we use it in our drama piece?

How did it improve what we did?

What would I have done differently if there was more time?

**Character backstory:**

What is the purpose of this device?

How did we use it in our drama piece?

How did it improve what we did?

What would I have done differently if there was more time?

**Now ask the same questions of other devices:**

- ▶ Use of video as part of action
- ▶ Cross-cutting
- ▶ Forum theatre
- ▶ Passing the baton
- ▶ Semiotics
- ▶ Proxemics
- ▶ Thought/voice corridors
- ▶ Tableaux
- ▶ Still images
- ▶ Still images with captions
- ▶ Narrators, in and out of role
- ▶ Teacher-in-Role
- ▶ Point of View
- ▶ Marking the moment
- ▶ Choreography
- ▶ Gesture
- ▶ Pace
- ▶ Pitch
- ▶ Hot seating
- ▶ Thought tracking
- ▶ Sub plot
- ▶ Prologue
- ▶ Epilogue
- ▶ Monologue
- ▶ Duologue
- ▶ Climax/anticlimax
- ▶ Dramatic irony
- ▶ Dramatic tension
- ▶ Rising action
- ▶ Comic relief.