



[The Working Actor's Journey](#)

Discover the **APPROACH** of **WORKING** Actors!

Your Acting Mentors

Inside are thoughts, ideas, advice, and questions from both professional actors and theatre artists who have made this a lifelong career.

There are lots of different ways to work on a piece of text, whether it's a play, script, audiobook, and more—take what resonates with you, what challenges you, and what inspires or excites you—and leave the rest.

You'll likely see common themes and ideas repeated; there's a reason for that: it works!

I hope you enjoy.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Nathan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letter 'N' being particularly large and stylized.

Nathan Agin, host/creator
The Working Actor's Journey

Annie Occhiogrosso and Randall Duke Kim, Ep #25

(founders of American Players Theater)

[Listen to Randall and Annie's full episode.](#)

[Listen to their text work on Hamlet's advice to the players](#) (our 2nd most popular episode ever!)



Randall: *"read the script without bias."*

Annie:

1. *Find a comfortable and private place (no phones, tablets, people) and read the entire play. Stanislavsky, I believe, reminds us this is as close to a first time audience as we will ever have again.*
2. *Try to remember your first impressions of the play, it's characters, it's setting, etc. I had two students who after reading THE DOLL'S HOUSE exclaimed that they hated both Nora and Thorvaldsen. It was only after dissecting the play that they developed feeling for both.*
3. *Try to determine why the playwright chose the title he/she did. After all, this is the story we will be telling. Every character should have a relationship with the title and add to telling its story.*
4. *You should read the play, or at least your part, about fifty times. The great American actress Julia Marlowe suggested*

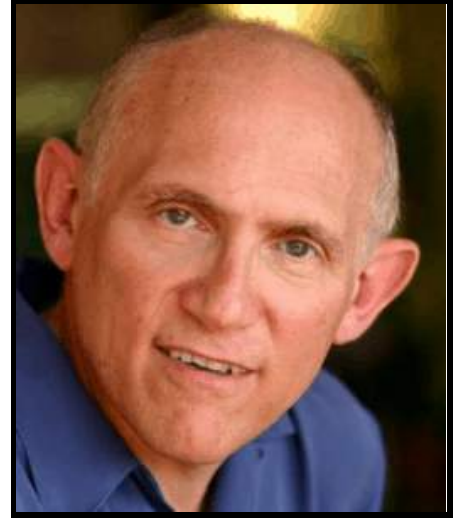
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this as a way to learn, not only, her part but her lines. Trust me after the first 5 or 6 readings you will be forced to change static line readings

- 5. KNOW WHAT YOU ARE SAYING! When we founded APT we had actors look up the definition of every word they spoke. This was a sure way for the audience to understand what was being said.*
- 6. See what patterns do speech or words you repeat. In TITUS ANDRONICUS, the eldest son, Lucius, constantly makes references to religious ritual and the gods. In the course of the play, Aaron the Moor, uses this observation and makes him swear he will not kill the son he begot of the Empress, knowing Lucius will not break a religious oath.*
- 7. Learn what other characters say about your character.*
- 8. Know the Style of the play you are in.*
- 9. Know facts and impressions about where the play is set.*
- 10. RESPECT THE PLAYWRIGHT! If you don't, write your own play.*

Armin Shimerman, actor, Ep #2

[Listen to Armin's full episode.](#)



1. Read the script
2. Read the script again. Try to suss out what the writer wanted when he/she wrote it. The conflict, the character of your character.
3. Investigate what the conflict is and decide what your intention is to solve the problem
4. Decide on what the arc of the scene is for the character, ie., how does your character change from the beginning to the end.
5. Lay out the game plan and then try to make the specifics personal to yourself.
6. Then once it is inculcated, throw it all away and be open to what the other actor is throwing at you.
7. If you are doing a classical scene, be pinpoint accurate about what the words mean and how they fit your character's argument

Brendon Fox, director

[Watch or listen to Brendon direct "The Merchant of Venice" in The Rehearsal Room.](#)

In essence, I look closely at every scene. In each scene ideally, every character should be different in some way than they were at the beginning of the scene. If they have the same objective at the end that they do at the beginning, then the objective should either have deepened or been shaken fundamentally. Or they may have a different objective by the end of the scene.



It's also crucial for me to look for what the main event is of every scene - the event can be something physical, like a gesture, or it could be a single line of dialogue. But every scene must have an event that significantly impacts the primary characters in the play.

I also make notes on if there are gaps of time between scenes, and what the specific given circumstances are for every character leading into the scene. I do this even if the characters are minor, like a servant in a Chekhov or Shakespeare.

Those are the macro lenses I use. On the micro and equally important level, I look at how every character uses language, i.e. Do they pause a lot? Do they stammer? Do they speak in elegantly long sentences? What's the vocabulary like? All of those are clues to who those specific characters are.

Elizabeth Dennehy, actor

[Watch or listen to Elizabeth in “Julius Caesar” in The Rehearsal Room.](#)



When looking at a script it's key to know what should be the first question asked. So often actors will ask How should I play this? How should I sound? How do I get the laugh?

HOW, is the wrong first question. The first question should be, WHAT - what am I trying to achieve? What is my character trying to accomplish? The mistake actors make is playing their own given circumstances instead of the characters'.

If you're asking HOW do I play this, you're stuck playing the actors' given circumstances and not your characters'. That's why you need to anchor yourself with WHAT.

Ask yourself about your character:

- 1. Who am I ?*
- 2. Where am I?*
- 3. To whom am I speaking?*
- 4. What am I trying to accomplish?*

5. *What are my obstacles?*
6. *What tactics and strategies do I use to overcome my obstacles?*
7. *What do I gain if I win? What do I lose if I don't win? These are the stakes.*
8. *What has happened right before this moment?*

If you can focus on the characters' given the circumstances and not the actors' you are then free to create an indelible, authentic and interesting portrayal full of discovery and drama.

Gideon Rappaport, dramaturg

[Listen to our Q&A episode with Gideon.](#)



1. *What kind of thing is it? Comedy, tragedy, romance, pathos, history, satire, etc.*
2. *Look up all the words you don't know.*
3. *Look up all the words you think you know but that aren't quite making perfect sense.*
4. *Is it in verse or prose or both?*
5. *When was it written and in what context (historical, religious, political, social, economic). Was it written by a starving artist in a garret or by someone under patronage or by someone already successful and rich? By someone young or middle-aged or old? By man or woman?*
6. *Is it a great work of art, such that the author can be trusted to be saying what he or she means? Or is it something patched together, sloppy, cliché-ridden, or shallow, so that the actor can only serve it by saving it. (If the script is by Shakespeare, this question is irrelevant, of course. Shakespeare can always be trusted to be saying what he means.)*

7. *Words should convey meaning, and meaning should guide development of the character. Trying to nail a character first and then interpreting the words is backwards.*
8. *It is the actor's job to become a clear and unobstructing medium of the author's meaning. Build up the character from the meanings of his lines and of the lines said by others about him.*

Jully Lee, actress

Asking "Why?" is my favorite question -- continuously throughout the entire script.

Starting from the character breakdowns!

I ask myself Why were these adjectives selected for this character? (Age, occupation, personality traits, temperament, etc.)



I come up with possible answers and it informs the inside life of the character, outside of the dialogue and the scene(s). This helps create a richer context for the character. When you just play the character as written in the breakdown, your take will likely be similar to other actors.

If you ask why? and approach the material with your own personal answers, it will help create a character with more specificity and depth that is true to you, and still in alignment with the given circumstances of the text.

For dialogue, if text feels funny in my mouth, or there's certain punctuation that feels confusing, I'll investigate further and ask *Why did the author write it this way? What was their intention?*

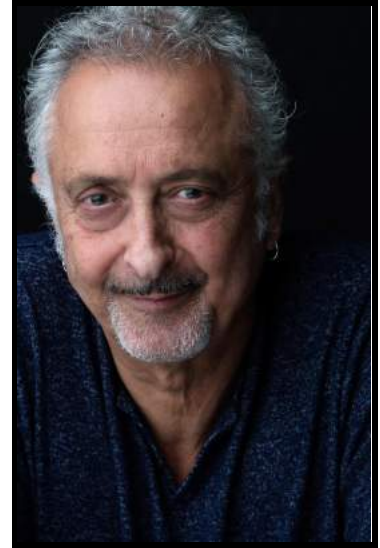
It's especially crucial to investigate deeper when text feels/sounds funny or awkward. If it feels/sounds uncomfortable to you, it will ring generic and untrue for the audience as well.

For supporting roles, I often ask "Why am I necessary?" This helps guide my understanding of my role and the effectiveness of my choices. Is it to provoke the lead? Harm the lead? Be supportive?

In these cases, it's also necessary to look at the character arc of the lead roles so that you have a better understanding of how to support those arcs with more specificity.

Marcelo Tubert, actor

[Watch or listen to Marcelo in "Troilus and Cressida" in The Rehearsal Room.](#)



My first thoughts when looking at a scene I'm working on is, do I understand what's going on in the scene, the situation, the verbiage, the relationship of the characters to each other. By reading and rereading the scene more info comes to light.

I let my imagination run with all this information to imagine what it would be like to be that character in that scene. I rely on my instincts to explore the situation and find subtle or maybe not so subtle approaches to the material.

I use this approach in all mediums. The only difference is that when doing a play, you get to rehearse and have other actors to relate to in this discovery period. This, of course, allows one to react to the actions of the other actors in ways you might not have thought of, if you were just working by yourself.

On a TV set, when you are guest starring or co-starring, you have to be prepared by knowing your lines and bringing the goods on "action". Of course, you will be getting to react to the other actors, which might change the way you had looked at the scene when you were working on it at home.

The key in all of this is to remain flexible and open to what's going on. Be in the moment and stay out of the results.

Here is some advice that was given to me many years ago by an actor friend who was a big star: You don't ever need to ask (after a take), "was that ok?" It sounds needy and there is too much at stake for them. If it wasn't right, they will ask you to do it again.

Susan Angelo, actress



— *Read the script over and again*

— *What is the “music” of the script? What are the inherent rhythms of the dialogue...and of the overall structure...its peaks, its valleys.*

— *What is the play about? How simply can I answer that?*

— *How does each character contribute to that story?*

— *Only after I spend time with the overall script, do I narrow the focus to my character:*

— *what is said about me?*

— *what do I say about others?*

— *what do I DO (actions speak louder than words)*

— *find the love....where is it?*

— *what’s my character's overall objective/obstacle.*

— *what’s the “argument” in my text....and can I let that guide me to discover who this person is.*

— how can I stay out of the driver's seat long enough to let the character guide me

— then.... in what ways can I personalize....identify.....imagine....so that the given circumstances have depth and specificity....

And I will say that every play has a different process and approach, and I let the play guide me to discover that. Sometimes, it's a very technical, language-based approach...sometimes it's just following a gut feeling, sometimes it's a thinly veiled nuance that guides....being open to hear the "music" that the playwright wrote is key for me.

Tony Amendola, actor, Ep #18

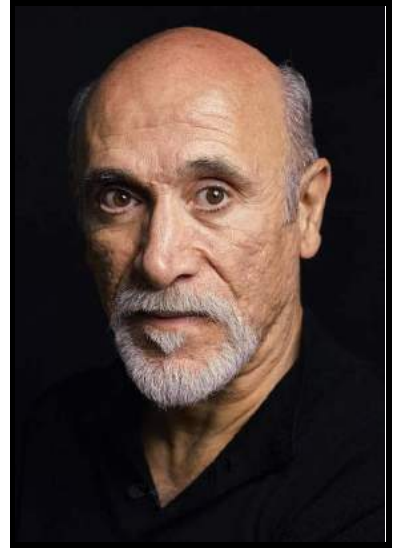
[Listen to Tony's full episode.](#)

Is there a different approach to text in different media? Yes, with the clearest example being the excavation necessary for heightened text.

The simplest questions are:

1. *Who am I ?*
2. *Where am I coming from?*
3. *What do I want?*
4. *What can I do to get what I want?*

That's an analytical approach that can be taught but the real richness is in how the actor answers and is stimulated by those questions .



Discover MORE advice and stories of amazing WORKING actors to listen to on your journey!

The podcast has over 25 interviews with actors that have worked in ALL mediums: regional theatre, films, TV, voiceovers, audiobooks, video games, commercials, industrials, and more!

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