

Unfolding the drama question

Enhance your descriptions with as much detail as possible and you can quite easily pick up marks in the drama question, and get to grips with the basic terminology of the theatre for a winning performance in the exam

Exam Focus: Answering the Drama Question

In the drama section of the paper, candidates are often required to write about aspects of dramatic performance, such as costume, lighting, sound effects or direction.

If you have no experience of performance or have never seen a play performed, this can be a daunting question. However, most students are very familiar with television and film and some of the same features apply.

The key point to remember is that the examiner is trying to reward you for the knowledge you display on the subject of drama. Therefore, everything you write should reveal your knowledge.

Do not just make assertions such as “I think he would wear a cloak and a hat.” Support your answer with your knowledge of how drama works, eg “I think he would wear a dark cloak and hat as we know from the text that he is not to be trusted, and this covering of his face would give a visual clue to the audience that this is the case.”

In the exam, it is important to explain why you would do something as well as what or how you would do it. Here are some key

points to bear in mind:

Costume

This refers to the clothes a character wears on stage. Everything about how they dress is important. The clothes a character wears can inform the audience of the era in which the play is set. The Shakespearian era, for example, or even a different decade, such as the 1960s, can be visually displayed to the audience very quickly through the costume used.

Costume also includes any minor props you think the character should carry, such as a walking stick, a newspaper, glasses or a briefcase. In each case, think about what you want to say to the audience about a character and their personality and what prop would display this most effectively.

The costume a character wears can also tell the audience whether the character is rich or poor, point to their interests or hobbies and even reveal key personality traits.

The set

The set refers to anything on stage that tells the audience where



Lighting is often used to draw the attention of the audience to a part of the stage or to provide atmosphere, as in this production of *La Tragedie de Carmen* at Wexford Festival Opera.

Photograph: Clive Barda

the scene is set. The interior of a house can reveal a lot about the occupants. Everything from the style of furniture to the pictures on the walls can reveal something about those that occupy this space.

You should be able to describe exactly what you think should be on the stage in order to give the appropriate clues to the audience. Do not be afraid of using adjectives to describe the set, for example, saying “an old, worn, faded sofa” says a lot more than just saying “a sofa”.

If it is an exterior scene, you may need to describe the backdrop (the painted scene at the back of the stage).

In some modern productions, the director may choose a “black box” style, where the backdrop and floor are black, and minimal set and props are used.

Sound effects/lighting

The sound effects and lighting are there to enhance the audience’s experience of the scene. Lighting may be used to draw the attention of the audience to a part of the stage or may be used to provide atmosphere.

Sound effects can also enhance the realism of the piece by using the sounds of gunfire, cars, thunder, etc as required by the scene.

Direction

You may be asked to give your instructions to the actors as if you are the director of the play. The role of the director is to instruct the actors on how they should say their lines, where and how they should move on stage and what gestures they should use to convey their message to the audience. You must be clear in your answer as to why you would require an actor to speak in a particular tone or move in a particular way on stage and of your motivation for this.

If you are answering this question as part of the unseen section, make sure you support your answer with reference to the text on the paper. And remember, always use quotations where necessary to support your point.



Costumes can tell the audience about the era and country a play is set in, such as this production of *The Shaughraun* at the Abbey Theatre. Photograph: Kip Carroll