

The 12 Dramatic Elements

These twelve dramatic elements are at the core of all drama. They can be used in isolation or simultaneously and are manipulated by the performer for dramatic effect.

1. Focus

Focus is often used interchangeably with the terms concentration and engagement, assisting the performer in the portrayal of believable characters. This also implies memorisation of text (including word, moves and gestures). Furthermore, focus requires the channelling (focusing) of all the performer's energies into achieving the given goals or objectives of a character in a scene (otherwise known as 'wants').

2. Tension

Tension can sometimes be used as an interchangeable term with conflict. But where it differs, lies in the development of suspense in a performance. As the audience anticipates certain outcomes in the plot, the tension builds. An obvious example of rising tension is in a mystery or whodunit. The development of tension usually parallels the advancement of the plot, leading to a crisis or climax. Tension is closely linked with timing.

3. Timing

Timing in performance refers to dramatic timing of movements and gestures. We often take our movements for granted in everyday life, but when performing, the use of our body must be carefully considered. Timing can be manipulated to create contrast in a scene or simply to demonstrate robotic, stylised and non-naturalistic movements. Rhythm and pace are affected by timing.

4. Rhythm

Rhythm refers to the timing and pace of the drama. It also means the beat or tempo of the performance. As a rule, rhythm should never be the same throughout the drama, regardless of its length. Rhythm can follow the emotional state of one or more characters or the atmosphere of the performance at particular moments.

5. Contrast

Without the careful use of contrast a performance is boring and lacks tension. An obvious example of contrast is a sad scene followed by a happy one. But contrast can be created in subtler and sophisticated ways, such as manipulating the drama to create a change in setting, use of space or rhythm. The pace of scenes can also be altered, as can various dramatic elements within one small section of a performance.

6. Mood

Mood is the feeling or tone of a performance. It refers to ambience or aura and is often created through a combination of several dramatic and stagecraft elements working in harmony with each other. The mood of a performance is closely linked with everyday feelings such as pity, anger, desire or frustration. Mood in drama can be created via sound, lighting, movement, setting, rhythm, contrast, conflict and more.

7. Space

This dramatic element refers to the effective use of available space in a performance. Different levels of space are utilised by the performer, such as sitting, bending over, lying down or crawling. Of course, using the space around you can mean downstage and upstage or walking in or on a stage set. In order to use the space effectively, movement becomes an important factor. Use of space also implies clearly communicating to the audience where the action is taking place. This may include any changes in location that may occur in the performance (particularly if little or no sets and/or props are being used and there is a heavy reliance on the audience's imagination).

8. Language

The use of language in performance can be verbal, vocal or non-verbal. Language is the spoken text. It is the written script realised in performance. While normally spoken by the actor, language can also be chanted or sung. It can also be deliberately nonsensical (gibberish) for dramatic effect. The choice of language in performance is crucial, as it forms a major means of communicating the story of the drama to the audience. Exactly how the actor in performance uses language is usually determined by the expressive skill of voice. However, language can also be non-verbal, commonly referred to as body language.

9. Sound

Modern theatrical practice relies on sound to assist in a number of ways. It can be useful in creating atmosphere or mood. Actors and their bodies can construct effective sound in performance. Small props can also create sound effects that can be used live during a show. Other uses of sound involve the implementation of technology, such as instrumental recordings and sound effects on CDs and mp3 players (though this use of sound is technically a stagecraft element in the theatre, not a dramatic element).

10. Symbol

The use of symbol in dramatic performance can be one of the simplest and also most complicated of all techniques. Essentially, symbolism implies a greater meaning than the literal suggestion. Props are the easiest to work with because objects in everyday life are symbols in society (for example a rose symbolises love; a cross symbolises Christianity). Symbols can also be found in the use of colour. We often symbolise purple with royalty, red with anger or desire, black with evil and darkness or white with purity and innocence. Colour association can be worthwhile symbols with costumes, sets and props. But the most sophisticated use of symbol occurs with the application of gesture and movement. A particular gesture performed by a character early in a performance can be repeated later under different circumstances (context) and have a very different meaning. Used only once, a gesture can also be a powerful symbol. Of course, all of the above examples can be combined for better effect.

11. Conflict

Playwright George Bernard Shaw (who wrote *Pygmalion*, which was later adapted to become the film *My Fair Lady*) once said 'No conflict, no drama'. How right he was! Drama that lacks conflict is normally dull and uninspiring. As a rule, conflict should always be considered an essential ingredient for all dramatic performances. Conflict can be between two or more characters, or simply one (inner conflict). Many Elizabethan soliloquies contain inner conflict ('To be or not to be...' is an excellent example). Conflict on stage can be verbal, physical or non-verbal (psychological). Conflict differs from tension in that it is often a fixed part of the structure of a play, with characters destined to clash with one another from the outset.

12. Climax

Most drama will have one or more crises in the development of the plot. A crisis is a key moment of dramatic tension and conflict in the play, usually occurring between two or more characters and having serious implications for the outcome of the plot. The ultimate crisis, or highest peak, is usually called the climax and often (but not always) occurs toward the end of a performance. There can also be more than one climax, although this is uncommon.