

ACADEMIC STUDIES

ENGLISH

**Support Materials and Exercises
for**

**IAU - READING COMPREHENSION
PART E : DRAMA**



SUMMER 1999

**IAU READING COMPREHENSION
PART E : DRAMA**

ACADEMIC ENGLISH

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The financial support for this learning materials project was provided by
the [National Literacy Secretariat](#) of [Human Resources Development Canada](#).

Summer 1999

OBJECTIVES

Upon successful completion of this unit, the learner will be able to

1. recognize and read with understanding and enjoyment a variety of written genres.

TEACHING POINTS			Level
Journalism	1	Parts of newspapers (e.g. editorial, features, hard news, etc.)	7
	2	Masthead	7
	3	Attention getters: headlines, placement, fonts, photos, colour	7
	4	Recognize fact and opinion (objective vs. subjective)	7
	5	Pyramid style of writing	7
	6	Writing leads (who, what, when, where, why, how)	7
	7	Parts of magazines: table of contents	7
	8	editorials	7
	9	feature stories	7
	10	columns	7
	11	ads and abbreviation, etc.	7
Short Story	12	Narrator: (point of view) 1st, 3rd limited, 3rd omniscient	7
	13	Plot: introduction, rising action, climax, denouement	7
	14	Character: central/minor; round /flat);methods of development	7
	15	Setting/mood	7
	16	Theme: central message or lesson	7
	17	Also myth, legend, fable	7
Poetry	18	Style: traditional & modern (free & blank verse)	8&9
	19	Types: ballad, limerick, narrative, sonnet, other	8&9
	20	Rhyme and rhythm (in general)	8&9
	21	Literary devices: simile, metaphor, personification	8&9
	22	alliteration, onomatopoeia	8&9
Non-fiction	23	define essay and prose; contrast with fiction	8
	24	Types: diary/journal, autobiography, biography, memoir, essay	8
Drama	25	Special Conventions: e.g. stage directions, dialogue/monologue,	9

	26	scenes and acts	9
	27	Plot, character, setting, theme in a one act play or modern play	9
Novel	28	Narrator: 1st, 3rd limited, 3rd omniscient	9
	29	Plot: introduction, rising action, climax, denouement	9
	30	Character: central, minor (round, flat)	9
	31	Setting/mood	9
	32	Theme: central message or lesson	9

Note: Continue to build the comprehension skills presented in BAU_ENG 3.1 -3.7.

NOTE TO FACILITATORS AND LEARNERS:

1. This module presents information and exercises to accompany the objectives of IAU-ENG 3.2 : READING COMPREHENSION.
2. Facilitators are free to use any support materials appropriate to their learners' needs.
3. Additional resource materials will probably be required for those wanting more information on this topic or for those needing more practice mastering certain areas. Reading materials can be drawn from any source and should be chosen to meet the individual interests and needs of each learner.
4. Alternate support materials may be appropriate. The Internet provides a wide variety of written materials, both the printed word and literature, at many reading levels.
5. Learners should participate in daily silent reading practice.
6. Learners should be encouraged to read all types of materials so they can develop their critical faculties for deciding which are examples of good writing, which deserve to be classified as literature, and which are unacceptable.
7. The purpose of reading literature is for more than investigating plot, character, setting or theme. Literature can be an invaluable tool for providing learners with writing models which they can emulate, often without conscious effort.
8. Reading widely is the basis for acquiring the broad general knowledge so important to future learning situations. It also provides a platform for discussions of life experiences, values, morality, decision-making, and many other topics useful to adult learners.
9. It is the learner's responsibility to search out additional reading materials to supplement the practice work included in this module by consulting with his/her facilitator.
10. Do **NOT** write in this module. Please make your notes and complete the exercises in your own notebooks so that other learners may also use these booklets.

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DRAMA

Drama is another form of narrative writing which uses plot, character, setting, and theme to present a story. It is, however, different from other forms or *genres* because it is never meant solely to be read by an individual; plays are written to be acted before groups of people. Unfortunately, we don't always have access to the live performance of plays, so many times we have to be satisfied with reading the *script*, or the words in a play. Although we watch movies and videos, these cannot be compared to attending a live performance, being in the same room as the actors and appreciating their craft, as well as sharing the experience with other audience members. Drama is best when it is seen and heard.

When a play is performed on stage, the actors, set designers, lighting people, costume makers, director, etc. work together to create a full, and rich environment for the play. Much of what we see on the stage, including how actors say their lines, the clothes they wear, the furniture they use, etc., comes from their imaginations, because **playwrights** (writers of plays) usually write mostly dialogue and rarely include much description. All the background details needed to make the play seem realistic must be provided by those who have undertaken to produce the play for the public. It is their job to interpret the author's "vision" of the drama as accurately as possible.

If, however, you are reading the script of a play, much is left to the imagination, because the author has not provided the details necessary to create a mental picture of the setting and the characters for the audience. The reader has to create the visual details in his/her own mind: the expressions on the characters' faces, their actions and gestures, the details of the set, scenery, lighting, music, and special effects. Although reading a play is quite different from seeing one, there are some advantages to reading a drama. Like the short story, it can usually be read in one sitting (especially a one-act play). You can re-read when you need or want to. You can imagine that a character looks any way you wish. Also, a play seems to be more immediate to the reader. Without all the surrounding detail that prose provides, we are left with dialogue - what the character says. There is little else, beside a few stage directions. Therefore, the reader concentrates on the essential elements. The actions, the ideas, the conflicts, and the people - all are presented rapidly and with a sense of immediacy that is missing in novels and short stories.

Most of the elements of plot, character, setting and theme which have been discussed in Reading Comprehension: Narrative apply to drama. The following sections of this unit will deal with how these elements differ when applied to a play.

Narrator

Very few modern plays have narrators. The dialogue and action are enough to supply information to the audience. However, if you have the opportunity to read plays which date from ancient Greece to the Shakespearean era, you may notice that the playwright or narrator adds commentary in the form of a Chorus, a Prologue or an Epilogue. An actor or a group of actors would supply necessary background information or remarks, before, after, and sometimes at breaks during the play. This device is seldom used in modern drama.

Plot

Obviously, a play is fiction. Although it may be based on historical fact, there is usually some creative input from the *playwright* (the author of the play) which “re-arranges” events in history to make them more presentable for the stage, more dramatic, more compressed, and more heightened for audience appreciation. The *action* of a play usually follows the typical plot structure as outlined in Reading Comprehension: Narrative - introduction, rising action (conflict and suspense), climax, and falling action (dénouement or conclusion). In a modern one-act play, this action (plot) must move rapidly, because of time constraints. Older plays often contain three to five acts, allowing for more gradual plot development.

Conflict plays as large role in drama as it does in any other type of fiction. The struggle between people, between groups of people or forces can be presented on a stage very graphically - you can actually see and hear the emotions and the events as they take place in right in front of you. It takes a little more creativity to present conflicts involving nature, or man against himself, but it is not impossible. (See Special Conventions later in this unit).

Character

When you are reading a play, probably the first thing you will see is a list of characters, the *dramatis personae* (persons in the play). These characters can be listed in the order in which they appear on stage, or in their order of importance (major characters before minor characters). Often each character's name is accompanied by a brief description of who he/she is, or how he/she is related to other characters in the play.

As in other forms of literature, the development of the major character is essential, while minor characters exist only to perform smaller, specific functions in the play.

Recall the methods of developing and presenting a character in literature:

1. What the character says
2. What the character does
3. What other characters say about him/her
4. How other characters react to him/her
5. What the writer says and thinks about the characters

In drama, which is primarily dialogue, you can assume that the important ways of developing character will be what the character says (see Dialogue) and what others say about him/her. The speeches of the characters are the only part of the play that remains unchangeable from one production of the play to another because that is the only thing which the playwright has written down. Everything else about a dramatic production comes from the minds and imaginations of those involved with "putting it on". There is, therefore, a little more leeway¹ for about how they characters will act and how they will react to other characters. In drama, there is the added dimension of sight and sound, which we cannot get from the printed page. A pause when speaking a line, or a gesture by an actor adds meaning to the spoken word.

The major character is referred to as the *protagonist*. His principal rival in

¹ Every time a play is produced, it is slightly different from every other production because every director interprets the play slightly differently.

conflict is the *antagonist*. In the past, groups of actors (acting companies) often worked together for years, and there were those who were considered the principal actors of the group, leading men and leading ladies. Playwrights actually wrote plays with these people in mind for the roles of certain characters. In the same companies could be found other actors who were skilled at playing *stereotype* or *stock characters*; the clown, the wise old man, the flirt, the bragging soldier.

Characters in plays represent real people, but they can also represent ideas or themes. Remember that they are the creation of a playwright, who may be using a character to dramatize his or her message.

Setting

The setting of a play involves time and place. These are usually stated directly in the program² of a play, near the cast of characters, if they are important to the background and understanding of the play. We may also receive this information through hints in the dialogue of the characters. The time period or era of a play can also be determined through clues in speech, costume and stage setting.

As you can imagine, the number of settings within a play must be somewhat limited as to place, because set changes are costly and difficult to manage. A play is written to be acted upon a stage. Presenting outdoor scenes can be a challenge, but it is usually handled with painted backdrops that present an artistic representation of the location. Traditionally, much of the play's setting is left to the audience's imagination (see Special Conventions). For example, sometimes two chairs are enough to show that a living room is intended while a clothes line stretched across the stage can signify a backyard in a working class neighbourhood.

The actual time lapse in a play can be hours, days or years. The reader or audience must accept the passage of time between scenes or acts of a play and listen for clues in the dialogue to determine how much time has passed. In the written form, the script and the program of a play (which you usually receive as an audience member) will indicate how much time elapses between acts or scenes.

² Programs are usually distributed to members of the audience as they arrive to view the play.

Theme

In drama as in other genres of literature, some works are written merely to entertain us, usually *comedies*. More often, plays have a serious message for the audience and their themes have relevance to our society and reflect our values. It is the playwright's job to guide us through the action of the play to this theme, which is seldom stated explicitly. The action or plot may seem to have no particular order, but it is there. Everything we see, hear and feel while reading or viewing the drama has been carefully chosen to lead us to the conclusion the writer wants the audience to understand and accept..

Special Conventions of Drama

Every play exists as a literary work (to be read) as well as a performance presented on a stage. It is this second function that makes drama different from the other forms of literature. The following sections will deal with some of those features of drama.

1. Format

Plays are usually divided into acts and acts are further divided into scenes. These divisions within the play are similar to chapters or sections in a novel. When the author starts a new act or scene, the action has usually moved to a new place/time, and a new aspect of the plot is developed. Because the script for a play does not include any descriptive or explanatory passages to help the reader visualize the action, the author often includes *stage directions* or instructions to the actors or readers about how and where the actors are supposed to move. Stage directions sometimes include descriptions of the emotions a character should be feeling and expressing or sounds heard off stage that relate to the action.

Most plays are written in either three or five acts. Some modern plays, however, are written in only one act.

2. Audience

Reading literature is a solitary activity. Viewing a play is a group activity. The playwright assumes that his play is written primarily to be performed and seen. There is a phrase often used in conjunction with watching a play: “the willing suspension of disbelief”. It means that in order to fully enjoy a performance and be open to the messages in a play, the audience has to be willing to accept, even if only temporarily, that the action on the stage and the characters are real.

In some theaters, active audience participation is encouraged. The stage may be in the middle of the audience. In others, the audience is expected to sit back and watch the proceedings as interested outsiders. At the very least, being an audience member involves a shared experience of the play with other, like-minded people. Our appreciation of the performance seems heightened when we share laughter, surprise, and other emotions with this group of people.

3. Actors

The actors in a play represent the characters in a story. These people bring their own individual touches to a role, because no two interpretations will be exactly the same. They interpret their roles through verbal and non-verbal elements.

The way in which the actor speaks his lines is a verbal interpretation of the words on the page of a script - the dialogue. The written word does not always give indications of how slow or how fast a character is speaking, or which word should be stressed or inflected. These choices are made by the actor or the director of the play.

Just as important as the spoken word is the movement on stage, or non-verbal interpretation of the play. The positions and movements of the actors on stage (called **blocking**) are carefully planned. If indications are not written into the script, the directors and actors decide who moves where, and when. Gestures and facial expressions also contribute to the performances. Nothing is left chance, although it may seem casual and spontaneous to those watching.

4. Dialogue

When you read a play, roughly 90% or more of what you read is dialogue - the speech between two or more characters. In written form, each character's name precedes what he says. On stage, dialogue is vital to the performance. You can hear inflection of voice, accents and speech patterns which enhance the actions of a character.

When a character speaks alone for an extended period of time, while other characters are on stage he is delivering a *monologue*. On the other hand, if a character is alone on stage and speaking his thoughts aloud toward the audience, this is a *soliloquy*. If other characters are present on stage during a soliloquy, we are to assume that they do not hear what the actor is saying. A character can also "confide" in the audience by turning slightly away from other characters and speaking a few lines directly to the audience or himself. This is called an *aside*. You may ask why these devices (monologue, soliloquy, and aside) are used; it doesn't seem natural for characters to be speaking to an audience, while other characters on stage pretend that they can't hear the speech. However, if you think about the difference between novels and short stories and drama, how else are we to learn the innermost thoughts of a character? In novels and short stories, we find out through reading what the character thinks. On stage, the character must tell us himself.

The dialogue of a play reveals much about a character: his or her attitudes, beliefs and values, level of maturity, and level of education. Pay close attention to certain features of speech, such as dialect (language spoken in a particular geographical region), tone of voice (serious, sarcastic, mournful, frightened) or level of language (formal or informal English, street language). They will give you good clues that will help you understand the characters.

5. Stage and Stage Directions

The acting area of a play is the *stage*. The most common type today is the *proscenium* stage. Three walls form the stage; the audience views the play through an *invisible* fourth wall. The stage may extend a little into the audience, forming an *apron*. A curtain can be closed during scene changes and is usually opened to

signify the beginning of the play and closed show the action is finished. In *theatre in the round*, the audience totally surrounds an *arena* stage. Actors enter and exit through the audience. Some stages extend into the audience part-way, with seating on three sides. These are called *thrust* stages.

Scripts give directions to actors to indicate where exits and entrances should be made, and where to stand. **Stage left** and **stage right** are from the actors' point of view as he/she faces the audience. **Downstage** is closer to the audience; **upstage** is farther from the audience.

6. Other Elements

Also contributing to the effectiveness of a performance are costumes, make-up, lighting, sound effects, music, setting and *properties (props)*. Costumes and make-up help identify the time period of the play and add to the visual quality of the play. Lighting and sound help to create the mood and atmosphere. The setting, or *set*, is the environment created for a play. It may be a room or rooms, or an outdoor scene. There are restrictions in the amount of space available to fabricate a set. A set may be created in much detail, or it can be very simple and stylized, leaving much to the imagination. Though a script may give specific details about a room and its furniture, these are only suggestions which may or may not be followed. *Props*, however, are mentioned directly in a script, and therefore need to be present in a scene. These are items to be used by the actors. If someone is to be murdered with a gun, the gun needs to be available and in its proper place on the set. If a scene involves characters having a meal, there must, at least, be dishes on the table with some food or props that resemble food.

READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Here are some questions to answer and discuss with your instructor after you have read a play. Be sure to include quotes from the text to support your answers.

Title

Does the title of the play you chose give you any insights into the theme or content of the play? After reading the play, explain the title in connection with the play.

Plot

Summarize the plot of the play by arranging events into introduction, rising action, climax or turning point, and dénouement.

Is the plot believable to you?

How was suspense created in the play? Was there any foreshadowing?

Conflict

What was the main conflict? How was it resolved?

How does this conflict connect with the theme of the play?

Character

Who are the main characters? (Protagonists, antagonist)

Do you think any of the major characters represent a theme in the play? Explain.

Do any characters change or develop during the course of the play? Describe the change and what caused it.

Who are the minor characters? What are their roles in the play, and for what purpose are they there?

Are the characters real and believable to you? Explain your answer.

Theme

What idea or message do you think the playwright was trying to communicate to the audience? Use examples from the play to support your opinion.

Setting

What is the setting of the play?

What details of setting are given explicitly to the reader, i.e. stated in the stage directions? Are there further details in the dialogue/

ACTIVITIES OR ASSIGNMENTS FOR EVALUATION

Make a sketch or diagram to illustrate your idea of the stage setting in the play you read. Provide detail of furniture, wall coverings, props, etc., in your setting.

Choose one short scene from the play you have read. Try to visualize the scene as it would be performed on a stage.

1. Choose 5-10 lines in the scene. Write detailed directions for each line, describing facial expressions , gestures, and body language of the speaker(s). Are there pauses between the words or lines? Are there certain words stressed in the lines (inflections)? Where are the actors standing and how are they standing when they deliver these lines? Do they move around at all?
2. How would you arrange the lighting of the scene?
3. Is there background noise or sound? Is there music? Describe the sounds you would choose.
4. Write a physical description of the actors in the scene. Describe in detail the costumes, make-up and hair style you would create for one or two of the major characters? What kind of clothing would you have them wear?

POSSIBLE CHOICES FOR THE PLAY

A play read at the Intermediate level should not be intimidating in its length, level of language, or content. The following titles are only suggestions. Learners should discuss their choice of play with their instructors, keeping in mind that this is only an introduction to drama and its conventions. The Internet is a good source of materials.

<i>Riders to the Sea</i>	J.M. Synge (one act)
<i>Printer's Measure</i>	Paddy Chayefsky
<i>Safeguarding the Land</i>	Gloria Skurzynski
<i>Inherit the Wind</i>	Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee
<i>Marty</i>	Paddy Chayefsky
<i>Abraham Lincoln: The Early Years</i>	James Agee
<i>Death of a Salesman</i>	Arthur Miller

FEEDBACK PROCESS

For feedback, please forward your comments to:

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 - relevancy of the provided examples;
 - others...

Page number	Nature of the problem	Proposed solution (include your text if possible)

