**[HOW TO TALK DESIGN](https://dramatics.org/how-to-talk-design/)**

[**Good results depend on clear communication**](https://dramatics.org/how-to-talk-design/)

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OF ALL THE MEETINGS you will have over the production process, the first design conference may be the most important. Don’t let this meeting, so far from the stress of tech, be just a casual chat and an exchange of contact info. If you and your colleagues can clarify with a director ten key questions at that first meeting, you will get the production off to a running start.

Top ten questions to have answered by the end of the first production meeting:

**1. Why is the director taking on this show?**The reason might simply be pragmatic — the producing theatre needed a director, and she was available. Nothing wrong with that, but make sure you learn early if there are other reasons. Did the director choose this play? If so, why? Does it fit into a larger season with a particular theme? Does it commemorate an anniversary?

**2. How does the director feel about the play?**This is a tough one. Here you must listen closely and be part detective, part psychologist. In most cases the answer will be fairly neutral — the director likes the play and is eager to work on it. However, a director might be intimidated by a play, especially if it is a classic or a challenging new work. Or this might be the director’s favorite play and they have been waiting years to get the chance to do it. Occasionally you might work with a director who actually is disdainful of the play. Is the director a scholar of this playwright’s works? Does the script hold personal importance to him? Each scenario brings interesting collaboration challenges.

**3. What does the director think the play is about?**What are the themes she wishes to focus on? Most directors should be able to answer without effort. You may spend less time discussing a screwball comedy than Shakespeare, but don’t assume you know the answer. Is *Romeo and Juliet* about young love, or is it about rash actions leading to disaster? There might be a dozen or more perfectly valid thematic statements about a particular play, and no one design is going to work for all of them.

**4. Who is the play about?**This is the script analysis you’ve studied in school — protagonist/antagonist and all that. Again, this is the director’s specialty, and a good one will make it clear, but if you’re unsure you need to ask. This question of “Whose story is this?” has particular importance for costume and lighting designers.

**5. What is the director’s vision for the “world of the play”?**In other words, how does the director feel about the mood and tone of the setting? It is essential that everyone leaves the first meeting with a clear understanding of this answer, even if the answer is, “the concept is fluid and may change.” If the director and you and your colleagues all have different ideas about the look and feel of the show, there will soon be headaches.

**6. What are the given circumstances of the play, and does the director intend to make changes?**
For a contemporary work, it’s unlikely the production will ignore the text’s answers on this — most of us wouldn’t put *Hairspray* anywhere other than 1960s Baltimore — but for classics, directors frequently adjust time and place. The director will obviously make this clear, but a change of setting makes question five all the more important. For example, declaring that the play will be set in “Victorian England” isn’t enough: Is this a world of velvet and crystal or bricks and soot? If the director is calling for a change of place and time, then you need to ask question 6.5 — why? The answer might be “Just for fun” (unlikely), or that the director believes the change of setting will lend a fresh take on the play or help the audience better understand its themes.

**7. What moments does the director see as pivotal or climatic? What is the specific moment of the climax of the play — a scene, a line, a word?**
Be careful here, as the true dramatic climax can be easy to miss. It might not be the moment when the gun goes off but instead the moment when the character decides to fire the gun.

**8. How does the director see movement in the play?**
This covers a lot, from acting style to scene shifts. Is the play claustrophobic or expansive? Is it busy and frantic or slow and stately? What is the tempo of the play? This will obviously affect all design areas. Plays with a lot of comic acrobatic movement will need different costumes and scenery than quiet, intense psychodramas. Sound and light designers must understand this tempo and movement question long before they begin drafting their plots.

**9. Is the director concerned about any staging, effects, or content?**
Is there a particularly difficult scene shift or costume quick change? Does the text call for a special effect that might be tough to achieve? Is there nudity or a particularly violent scene that should be approached carefully? The earlier these things are discussed, the sooner you can work solutions into your design.

**10. Does the director have any specific staging in mind?**
If so, get as much information as possible. This is probably the most important, frequently unasked question at that first design meeting. For example, if you ask this question and the director answers, “Well yes, I’d like to see Oedipus bursting out of the palace doors clutching his bleeding eyes and then stumbling down the steps to fall at the chorus’s feet,” then the set had better have palace doors that swing outward and are capable of “bursting through” and stairs wide enough to fall down and a level space at its foot large enough for the chorus. The costume needs to allow for this fall and the stage blood the director has in mind. The lighting designer had better think about backlighting upstage of the doors or at least some kind of special to highlight this dramatic moment. And what sound do those doors make? What sound accompanies our king’s great fall from power?

This last question cannot be stressed enough. If you and the director never discuss one another’s pre-existing visions for particular staging, then there is likely to be disappointment on opening night. The director might have been excited by your set sketches and renderings and given you the green light without ever noticing the absence of palace doors and steps until it’s too late. The director might not even know why she’s dissatisfied with your set once the actors are on it. “It’s fine, I guess,” might be the director’s final judgment, when the only thing wrong is that she didn’t get to stage her “fall of Oedipus” moment, because the question was never asked at the beginning.

Don’t forget to express your own ideas and concerns as well at your first design meeting. If you have staging ideas, now’s the time to share. Use the power of your pencil—a quick thumbnail sketch can do wonders. Listen carefully to your colleagues as well. You might be able to offer an easy solution to one of their problems, and if the director agrees, that’s one less thing to worry about.

You should aim to be a collaborative partner with the director in this process, but you cannot ignore a director’s clearly stated requests. It’s fine to come to the second meeting with images or sketches illustrating your own alternative idea, but only after you have addressed the director’s.