

# Reading for Writers

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## **Sanford Meisner Quotes**

"Acting is behaving truthfully under imaginary circumstances."

"Less is more!"

"Silence has a myriad of meanings. In the theatre, silence is an absence of words, but never an absence of meaning."

"Every little moment has a meaning all its own."

"Acting can be fun. Don't let it get around."

## **Introduction**

We do not read our stories to convey data. We read them to convey wonder, terror, love and joy. People buy our work because we move them and they want it, not because they need it as they do bread or soap. An authorial reading that does not move your audience to want more is useless.

You are not a reader. You are a story teller. You are not getting through words on a page, you are conveying the magic and mystery of another world to your listeners.

When you read your work, you are an actor. The single most common (and meaningful) comment from producers and directors looking at a good performance is "that was believable." If you are reading the internal monologue of an anguished person as if you were a robot, nobody will believe it. They also won't believe you or your work.

If your writing is good, if the story is compelling, then it deserves respect. The blinding joys and crushing agonies of your characters must reach out and touch the members of your audience so that their hearts nearly explode. The good news is that reading this well should be easy for you because you wrote the story in the first place. Nobody knows it better than you.

The bad news is that we wrote the story in the first place and frequently we get in our own way.

## **Profiling**

Among actors this is called scene analysis.

You must **connect with the material**. This seems counter-intuitive. After all, you wrote it, why wouldn't you connect with it? However, we often write things that make us personally uncomfortable. We don't like to think that we may identify with the sadist who is torturing someone.

You must get over it.

Humans have evolved very sophisticated internal falsehood meters. Frequently we don't know exactly why we don't believe somebody, we just feel that they are lying to us. If your performance is a lie, people will know it, feel uncomfortable and you've lost them.

You must identify with **every single character** so that you can speak with their voices. You must **connect** with them under the circumstances in which they find themselves. If you are reading a

sad scene and you find tears coming to your eyes, you are in the right zone. That does not mean that there is intrinsic virtue in crying. It is only an external indicator that your emotions have connected with those of the character.

Consider the character's **moment before**, the **location** and the **circumstances**. All of these will influence how a person reacts to a given situation.

In short, you must get far enough into your characters' heads that you believe what they are saying. Not pretend to believe – actually believe – and know why they are doing what they do.

Hey, if acting were easy then Robert Downey Jr. would get five bucks an hour.

## **Sharon Shinn: Fortune and Fate**

*He didn't speak right away. He'd opened the book to its first page and studied it for a moment, as if savouring it, the way she had seen some men savour the scent of a wine before taking the first sip. His face changed in a way she found difficult to describe – as if he was overhearing voices from a nearby room explaining mysteries that he had always wanted to learn. When he finally began reading, his voice was also subtly changed – more resonant, more deliberate.*

## **Your Voice**

Operatic stars don't sit or slouch. Take the hint. Some people can read effectively when seated, you probably aren't one of them. If you must sit, perch on the edge of your chair so you can have a greater than 90 degree angle between your legs and torso. Your diaphragm will thank you.

Lift your chin, especially if you have lowered your voice tone. Burying your chin in your chest doesn't help lower your voice, it just strangles it.

Learn to breathe so that you have enough air for what you must do. In one story I have a drunk character who speaking in stream of consciousness for about a paragraph. If you don't see that coming and suck in enough air, you are doomed.

A tip from singers: your throat hates dairy products and crumbly foods immediately before a performance. The former will make you sound like you are drowning in glue, the latter can cause a coughing fit at inopportune moments.

Always have water available. If you are reading a lot then try a mixture of water, honey, lemon and ginger. This was the secret weapon of Andy Serkis when he had to do his Gollum voice all day. Find your own best proportions for the mixture so it isn't cloying and doesn't make you cough. Carbonated beverages are (BURP!) a bad (BURP!) idea.

Learn to speak from your diaphragm and your throat as required. Set your volume so that the people in the back row can hear you but you don't blow their ears out. A yell during a reading is nowhere near full volume and a whisper is much louder than a real one. It's the voice quality that is the major clue to what's going on, not the actual loudness.

Modulating your voice to express gender, emotion and intention is your most powerful tool. A monotone or over-acting is your surest route to disaster.

Make **bold choices** when you read. Listeners are more forgiving of someone who is interesting than someone who mumbles shyly through a story.

## **Gestures**

We have a tendency to make “air quotes” when they appear in the text, make stabbing motions while someone is being killed or raise our arms defensively when someone is being attacked.

Don't.

Reading is a peculiar form of acting. You are voice acting, but you are not buried in a studio where you can do any goofy thing you want. You can be seen by your audience. On the other hand, you don't have the props, make up or room to do physical acting.

Miming gestures looks awkward and foolish. Just don't.

Your audience will not see the character speaking “air quotes,” they will see the reader making air quotes. If you've been doing your job up until then, they will drop out of the moment and wonder why you are waving your fingers around when that poor character is in such trouble.

None of this applies to facial expression or subtle movement. If the character is smiling, you can certainly smile. If the character touches the other person's face tenderly, you can touch your own cheek. Make sure that these things are subtle. There's nothing worse than somebody reading material about two lovers hugging and making the audience wish the author would get a room with herself.

Facial expression is what you need to concentrate on. Without it you will be a talking zombie. With it, even though the rest of your body doesn't move much, you will deliver a vibrant and engaging performance.

## **Character Voices**

In the immortal words of Det. Spooner in *I. Robot*: Oh. Hell. No. Cartoon-like voices, triply so, unless you can learn to be subtle about it or your name is Mel Blanc.

Here's some psychobiology for you: Deep voices are authoritative, disapproving or sexy. High voices are submissive, approving or childish. This is why animal trainers lower the tone of their voices when correcting an animal and go higher when praising. A high, squeaky “bad dog” sends conflicting messages. Note that high and low pitch are relative. A woman can be authoritative and a man can be childish.

If you are reading the part of a cop, go a bit lower and more forceful. That means not reading it as “stop, police” but as “STOP! POLICE!”

If you are reading a romantic scene, try going so low that your voice becomes gravelly or husky.

If you are reading the part of a child, go very slightly higher and speak gently to get the harshness out (speaking in the throat). You want to suggest the voice of a child, not try to imitate one. Especially if you are normally a booming basso profundo.

The same is true of men reading women's parts. Don't break into a full falsetto, just speak with more breath. If you saw the end of season four of *True Blood* when Lafayette was possessed by the woman with the dead baby, you saw a wonderful example of a man pitching his voice to suggest a woman without sounding idiotic.

Observe the rhythm of people's voices when conveying different meanings. Examples: “I love you.” “Read my lips: what part of 'no' don't you understand.”

Many people have trouble understanding full-blown accents unless they are familiar with them. If you can do a light accent then that may work but it must be a hint, not a sledge hammer. As a side

note, don't do an accent unless you can really do it. Nothing irritates a listener like someone badly pretending to do their native accent.

Squeaky voices are incredibly difficult to understand and sound stupid when you can see that the guy doing it is built like a line backer.

Experiment with your voice in private. Learn what works for you. Record yourself trying things to see what sounds realistic or ridiculous. Ask other people for their opinions and watch them while they are listening. Your friends may insist that everything you do is wonderful but if you watch their faces, you'll see the “ugh” reaction.

## **Timing**

The larger the audience, the slower you should read. An exciting scene should be read more quickly than a quiet one. A scene in which people are sneaking around should be slower than normal.

These are general principles that can guide you in your timing but it all depends on what you are reading.

Play with the timing. If five minutes of silence is supposed to go by, experiment to find out how long you can actually stand there staring at your listeners to give them the feeling of an interminable wait without wasting time. You'll be surprised at how short the actual period is. Actually count out the interval silently during your performance.

If your characters are sneaking through the woods and one says “ssh, what's that?”, put in a two second pause. If you've done things well to that point, you'll find the audience holding their breaths and listening. Then you can go on.

Related to timing, learn how to enunciate. For extra negative points, mumble *and* speak quickly.

Parenthetical phrases are not rushed. “He had been a football star in high school, although nobody would believe it now, and he could still run.” Make the phrase in the middle sound almost like a separate sentence that is being spoken in confidence to your audience.

## **Rehearsal**

As an acting coach once said to me, “amateurs rehearse until they get it right, professionals rehearse until they can't get it wrong.”

Unless you are an expert (and even then) practice before you read. Try variations on the voices, qualities and timings to see what works and, just as importantly, what doesn't. Sometimes the feelings you thought were in the scene when you wrote it just don't come across when the words are spoken.

You may need to remove or add attributions to keep things straight for the audience. If you are doing one voice as a New York male cop and another as an Irish female, you don't need to keep the he/she saids. Similarly you don't need to keep the “she whispered” because you are actually stage whispering as you speak.

If you have an unusual term or name in your story, make sure you can pronounce it without thinking about it. A few milliseconds of hesitation will throw off the rhythm of your speech and be obvious to listeners.

## **Terror**

Sometimes, reading in front of people scares us. It happens.

The great news is that you are reading “on book” – from your manuscript. You don't have to have anything memorized which means you don't have to worry about forgetting your lines. Make sure that there are no misprints or typos. If there are, you will stumble over them on the day.

Don't give in to the temptation to look only at your manuscript. You can keep your place by running your finger down the lines as you read them. Double spacing leaves room for your finger, single spacing will allow you to get lost. In between glances at the paper, look at members of your audience. Eye contact makes people think you are reading to them, not to a sheaf of papers, and that small personal contact will sell books.

Once you have a lot of experience, you can read from an actual book or from an e-reader. At first, stick to sides (physical pages printed on one side only).

Reading is much easier with a lectern. It allows you to have your manuscript just below eye level without fatiguing your arm.. If your hands shake you can put the papers on the table in front of you but it will be more difficult to connect with your audience and keep your voice clear. You may wish to sit in such cases.

Regardless of how well you think you are doing, it is better to read in a clear, audible voice than to try to be quiet and unobtrusive. All that does is make you look like you don't believe in your own work. If you don't, why should the audience?

Practice will help you to get over the embarrassment of actually having emotions on stage.

A True Story: Sir Lawrence Olivier was asked what the essence of acting is. He stood, bent over the interviewer almost nose to nose, and said “look at me, look at me, look at me...”

What seems horrible to you may actually be a subtle and nuanced performance. Don't rely on your terror to give you a truthful opinion of yourself.

A True Story: Johnny Depp was asked what he thought of his new Pirates of the Caribbean film. He said “I liked the parts I've seen.” It turns out that, like many other actors, he has trouble watching himself on screen and closed his eyes whenever he was visible!

## **Improvisation**

All this is great if you have lots of notice that you'll be reading. But what if you must read on the spur of the moment?

Exactly the same principles apply, you just need to connect with the material and put emotion into your performance. Unbelievably, this works, even if you are handed someone else's book to read.

It might seem odd to speak of practising improvisation, but if you can pick up a random book, open it to a random page, and deliver the words in an interesting way, you will have it made.

## **Resources**

- *The Intent to Live: Achieving your True Potential as an Actor*; Larry Moss
- *The Power of the Actor*; Ivana Chubbuck
- *The Actor's Art and Craft: William Esper Teaches the Meisner Technique*; Esper, William. DiMarco, Damon

