

REQUIREMENTS FOR ADMISSION OF YOUNG PEOPLE TO THE THEATER

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HOW TO BEGIN

The first step in preparing your application is to ask yourself: Self, why do I want to go to drama school?

Perhaps it's to channel your inner Viola Davis—or Stanley Kubrick! Or maybe you're a budding Edith Head with a special eye (and love) for costume design. Or you could be into lighting or sound design—theater history even.

The point is that drama school applicants—like applicants to liberal arts schools and engineering schools and trade schools and [insert school type here] schools—come in a plethora (#FavoriteCommonEssayWord) of shapes/sizes/interests/backgrounds/motivations. Some long to be in front of the camera, some behind it, but the vast majority of those on any given production are the unseen professionals who have contributed (often significantly) to the whole. Looking at you, dramaturgs.

Since it's (like, literally) impossible to cover the perspectives of all those would-be applicants, for this post, I'll focus on applying to drama school as an actor, since that's my experience. But much of what I share will be equally applicable to the many other areas that make up a drama school program.

Ready to break a leg? No? Good, because one tip to avoid blending in is to avoid using clichés. (Unless you can change it to make it your own. Then it could be fun.)

Ok, let's get started.

The application

Online application: The [Common Application](#) is widely used to apply to many drama school programs. Fill out the application as you would for any other school that uses it, then complete any additional supplemental materials the program may be asking for. If the program uses its own application, no worries—you're bound to notice many similarities to the Common Application.

Essay/artistic statement: Most, if not all, drama school programs will ask you to write an artistic statement, also known as a statement of purpose. These statements, often limited to about 500 words, are designed to gain insight into who you are as an artist, what interests engage all five senses, which experiences/skills you bring to the table, and what you envision for your creative future.

Think of it in 2 steps ...

- **Step 1:** Share your “why”—why do you want to pursue a career in drama? What do you want to say as an artist? If you haven’t clarified these questions for yourself, think back to your origin story—what first inspired you to explore theater? What did that experience mean to you, and how did it drive you to explore new frontiers?

- **Step 2:** Define the impact you’d like to make in the dramatic arts. Is it to amplify marginalized voices? Or is it about innovating new sound technologies? Whatever your answer, look at it as an opportunity to share not just what your career can do for you, but how you can use it to benefit the community you’re joining.

These two steps will ground your artistic statement around your [core values](#). Check out this article, [How to Write a Personal Statement for Acting School](#) from Backstage, an excellent resource for all things acting-related.

Transcripts: As with any other college application, transcripts are required to demonstrate evidence of your academic potential.

Recommendations: Generally speaking, you’ll be required to submit 2 to 3 recommendations, so make sure to choose recommenders who are familiar with your artistic and creative endeavors—teachers, directors, and creative professionals who know your work (and appreciate it). Ask them to highlight your talent, skill, and future potential. [More on how to ask here](#).

[How to prepare a portfolio: a step-by-step guide](#)

ARTISTIC RESUME

This is a one-page listing of your involvement in theater. If you’re an actor or director, list the shows you’ve acted in or directed. If you’re in technical theater, showcase your production experience and technical expertise. Maybe also include any related classes, workshops, seminars, honors, work experience, service opportunities, or special skills.

Here’s a [comprehensive guide on entertainment industry resumes](#).

PHOTOGRAPHS

Visual documentation of your past work, photographs, sketches, draftings, renderings, etc., can be useful in helping the application reader (literally) picture your talent.

Consider adding photographs of 1) props, costumes, or scenery you’ve built (the items themselves should be left in storage, 2) 3D models you’ve constructed for class projects (again, no need to lug these to the interview), or 3) productions, if you’ve had the opportunity to design sets, lighting, or costumes.

ARTISTIC SAMPLES

Completed lighting cue sheets, hook-up sheets, and gel sheets, as well as a drafted light design, show a familiarity with the level of precision needed for successful

lighting work. Sound cue sheets and system diagrams offer evidence of an audio technician's skill. Stage managers can include completed show prompt-books, cast and crew contact sheets, rehearsal schedules, and other samples of organizational and communication expertise.

Every drama school is different, so you'll need to check out each school's website and make sure you're familiar with the program's specific requirements. Think of your portfolio as a living document that breathes life into your resume. Since theater is generally a visual medium, most schools will require photos of your work in the theater. Lead with your strongest material.

HOW TO GET INTO ACTING SCHOOL WITH NO EXPERIENCE

You just read that subhead and were like, Whaaat?! But getting into drama school with no acting experience is doable—difficult, yes, but certainly possible. As access increases around the world, so do your odds. But strategy is critical. Below are a few thoughts on how to prepare for a drama school application if you have little to no experience.

UNIFIEDS

The National Unified Auditions is an alliance of undergraduate B.F.A. programs that hosts annual auditions in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Right now, there are 27 schools from across the U.S. that attend Unifields. This route offers a number of advantages: travel to one location + audition for many programs in a single weekend = save plenty of time and money.

The disadvantages: You don't get to visit an actual campus and may not get as much attention as you would in an on-campus audition. Some schools require a pre-screen before you can be invited to audition at Unifields, so be sure to visit each school's website to learn more about specific requirements.

SELF-TAPE PRACTICE

The transition to a wider virtual landscape has opened up access and opportunity that was previously less available—now, just about anyone can audition from anywhere.

That's why I highly recommend that anyone interested in theater, film, television, new media, etc., develop a self-tape practice. A self-tape is exactly what it sounds like: the practice of putting yourself on tape. With the abundance of technology available today, a smartphone or computer with a camera is pretty much all you need to get started, and self-taping can be done from almost anywhere.

This technique is an excellent way to familiarize yourself with not only acting, but also directing, lighting, sound, editing—pretty much the gamut. To get started, record yourself performing a monologue, watch your performance, identify areas of improvement, and re-record yourself accordingly. With each completed self-tape,

you'll find your confidence in yourself grow with your abilities, which will then translate to auditions you happen to land when you apply to drama school.

YOUTUBE

There are some excellent acting instructors who provide free lessons on YouTube. Because actor training is individual and subjective, I suggest you try various teachers until you find a few who speak your language.

Where to begin? By seeking lessons from influential acting teachers. Sanford Mesiner, Stella Adler, Uta Hagen, Lee Strasberg, Konstantin Stanislavski, and Michael Chekhov have developed techniques that are often taught in actor training programs worldwide. Michael Caine also has an excellent workshop on acting for the camera. The key is to get started and see what works for you.

BA: If you don't necessarily want to pursue drama professionally or have other academic interests, a BA may be the better bet. This route is ideal if you're not quite ready for full-on studio training and want to keep your options open.

Perhaps you don't want to perform all the time—maybe you want to teach or become an editor or an agent. A BA allows you to gain a solid foundation in a specific art form in a traditional liberal arts setting. You often can still take training classes (voice, speech, movement), but you'll also get to explore the theories behind the art form.

SEVEN DIFFERENT WAYS YOU CAN STUDY THEATRE IN COLLEGE

BFA/conservatory: Like I said, think of these as “all theater, all the time.” Full conservatory will have some theater studies and dramatic theory, but the focus will be on developing a solid technique to become a professional actor.

BA/liberal arts college: The focus here will be on academics, similar to most undergraduate programs. A BA is not as immersive or intense as a conservatory, but you'll likely have opportunities to study theater. Joining drama club, auditioning, performing with various on-campus organizations or troupes, designing, getting involved in Front of House and crew—there are SO many ways to get involved with theater.

If you're not majoring in theater, you'll probably want to check which opportunities are available for non-majors. Honestly, people who work in theater usually take all the help they can get. Another upside to this option is that the same instructors who teach in the conservatory often offer classes for non-majors, a great entry point into learning from professional artists.

Hybrid programs: Some schools offer a mix of BFA and BA. A hybrid program's weekly curriculum may look something like this: 3 days of full conservatory (9 a.m.-6 p.m.: acting, scene study, improvisation) + 2 days of academic classes (math, science, history, etc.). These programs may also grant you the freedom to minor in another academic subject or major in another area besides theater.

Study-away semester: If you want a heavy dose of the actor training life, an entire semester studying theater may be the fun fit. Study-away semesters are programs at another institution, domestic or international—complete immersion programs (9 a.m.-10 p.m./7 days a week) that offer a glimpse of life at a conservatory.

This option can be intensive due to the truncated nature of a semester away, but you can reap lots of benefits during your time there.

Certificate program in your metro area: A certificate program can be a low-stakes, lower-cost approach to pursuing your actor training. Certificates, commonly found at community colleges or extension schools, range from a few months to a couple of years to complete. Make sure to look up the specifications of each certificate program, as they vary widely.

An acting intensive: An acting intensive is exactly what it sounds like: an immersive training experience condensed into a set amount of time. Intensives can last anywhere from one week to one month (sometimes longer).

Be prepared to dedicate much of your time to such a program, as you'll likely have plenty of work expected both during and outside any scheduled classes. An intensive can be a good idea if you want to learn the fundamentals of acting or a specific acting technique that you could then apply to your auditioning skills.

BA, then MFA (aka the route I took): This is an option to explore if you're considering whether to study theater as an undergraduate or a graduate student. Say you want the traditional undergraduate college experience but then want to pursue a conservatory-style training program in graduate school. Graduate acting programs tend to be pretty small and pretty intensive for two to three years.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A PRE-SCREEN/ARTISTIC REVIEW?

Different programs have different requirements, so look up the guidelines to the school or program you're applying to so you know exactly what you're required to submit. Some common requirements:

PRE-SCREEN

This is a digital review of materials to help manage the selection process and decide who'll be invited to audition. Usually, earlier deadlines (September-October) require you to upload this type of digital content (here's where that self-tape practice comes into play):

Actors: Think 1 or 2 monologues (1 contemporary/1 classical) (60-90 seconds).

Musical theater (monologues/singing/dancing): A common set of guidelines has been developed for musical theater that can be found here.

Wild-card video: Record 60-90 seconds that show something else about yourself. Options include "about me," juggling, painting, playing the flute—anything's game.

ARTISTIC REVIEW

Exactly as it sounds, this is a review of your art. At a college or university, the admission office handles the academics while the theater department handles the artistic review. Once you submit your online application, most departments will request examples of your work to date.

For actors, this often means contrasting monologues, a headshot, and a resume. If you're a director, designer, writer, or producer, you may be asked for a portfolio review—quite simply, a compilation of work samples.

How to Crush Your Theater School Audition (and Avoid These 5 Common Mistakes)

Wear clothing you feel confident and move freely in. Clothes can reveal who you are as an artist. Look like you take the process seriously and professionally (but also use them to show your style and personality).

Find material that resonates with you and makes you want to share it with others. If you're so excited about it, that will read and shine through in your auditions. You're sharing something you love with people who love it too (remember these are theater people).

The term “contrasting monologues” means sharing two different sides of yourself as an artist. Sometimes, young artists can get comfortable in how they perform because they're good at it. Try to show you have more than one side to your talent. Perhaps you're dramatic in one monologue and portraying a lighter situation in the other. Maybe the relationship with the character you're speaking to is different in the second piece than the first piece (mother to son, then friend to friend, etc.).

If you're invited for a callback, do the same thing you did during the initial audition, unless you're given specific direction otherwise. They brought you back for a reason—don't give them a chance to second-guess your talent!

Common mistakes:

- Choosing pieces that are too common and familiar
- Thinking gender doesn't matter (this is your acting)
- Assuming your choice must be from published plays
- Not following directions (this is a BIG one)
- Messing up the memorization (if you flub a line, stay with it)

Here's perhaps one of my biggest pieces of advice: After you're done applying to drama school, let it go. You've done your best, now leave the rest. Just like with the college admission process, there's too much unpredictability and subjectivity involved to stress yourself out about the outcome. Remember that there are a variety of options to get that acting training you so crave.

If you're admitted to one of your dream programs, congratulations!

Now the hard part begins. Drama school is one of the most rigorous and deeply personal experiences you can undertake. It'll force you to know yourself in so many ways. You'll be stretched and challenged and occasionally pushed to your limits, but it's all in service of your craft (and your audience). To be an actor is to expose yourself for all to see. It requires discipline, stamina, courage, empathy, and creativity.

LITERATURE

1. How to Write the Haverford College Supplemental Essays: Examples + Guide 2023/2024
2. <https://www.nyt.org.uk/auditions-2/auditions-guide/>
3. <https://www.collegeessayguy.com/blog/how-to-apply-drama-school>