



Introductions - a brief guide

Introductions describe the visual elements of a production and are sent out on a CD or listened to immediately before the performance. They include descriptions of settings, costumes, characters and the 'style' of a piece. They allow the describer to set the action of the play in its visual context, and to pre-describe certain visual effects when there may be no time to describe them during the performance. They can also include interesting material from the printed programme.

Introductions can be pre-recorded onto a CD and sent out to blind and partially sighted patrons before their visit and are sometimes put onto the venue's website. They are also read live before the performance in order to set the scene. This allows the audience members to settle themselves and familiarise themselves with the equipment and check they are receiving a good signal in the auditorium. It is also useful in case any changes have been made to the production, if there are cast indispositions for that performance and in case anyone did not receive a CD.

What should introductory notes include?

Although introductory notes can include material from the printed programme, time is limited and priority must be given to the visual. The rule of thumb is to use written material only when it helps to clarify historical or cultural background or gives an insight into the theatre company's approach to the piece. In short, only if it is useful to you as a describer.

Characters

You should describe what characters look like, their approximate age and build, how they move and what they wear.

Although the actor has a physical appearance all of their own, it is important to concentrate on the *character* they are portraying. This importance is more obvious in a production where one actor plays a number of parts.

Make your descriptions as active as possible, describing a character's movement, body language and the general way they relate to their surroundings, so that the audience gets a sense of characters as people not as mannequins.

A Streetcar Named Desire

Stanley is in his early thirties, a primeval force of nature, tall and muscular, drenched in sweat and testosterone, raw-nerved and dangerously unpredictable. Stanley's sandy hair is shorn into crisp short curls. His face is strong, with a belligerently jutting chin and his blue eyes are fierce. Although an uneducated man, Stanley is far from stupid. He weighs people up with a piercing look, boring into the heart of them to discover and expose their vulnerabilities. He barrels into the apartment in his grubby work clothes, a grey singlet and brown cotton trousers worn with heavy black boots. He strips off the singlet and uses it to towel down his broad chest and his underarms before pulling on a freshly laundered white T-shirt.

You will never be able to describe everything, so when describing a number of characters you will need to **prioritise** and concentrate your descriptions on important characters. You can allow yourself to be less detailed with others: a soldier, for instance, who delivers a message in Act Five, really isn't as interesting to an audience as Macbeth. In any case if we know enough about the style of the production already (it's set in the trenches in 1915, for instance) and there is nothing extraordinary about this particular soldier, we are going to be fairly confident of what he looks like.

Remember that describing something gives it a particular importance to your audience, so make sure you prioritise information.

Costumes

When describing costumes, you should reflect the period of the production. In this a certain amount of knowledge must be assumed, but you should not over-burden the description with terms which are too technical or specific. Sometimes you can use a technical term if it is followed by an explanation: 'he wears puttees - long strips of cloth wound around the leg,' for instance.

Remember that the idea is to encapsulate the visual style rather than provide a lecture on design.

For many productions - and particularly period plays - it is useful to have a paragraph which describes the costumes in general terms before focusing on specific characters.

'Hairspray'

The black kids who hang out at Maybelle's record store reflect the fashions of the day. The girls are stylish, wearing sleeveless dresses with pencil slim skirts, little cardigans or pedal pushers – cropped trousers - in bright rainbow colours. They wear flat ballerina slippers or high heels and their hair is straightened into a beehive or a flicked up bob. The boys have short hair and wear colourful shirts under sleeveless diamond patterned tank tops and loose trousers.

You should also mention the **style** of the design - are the costumes extravagant? Do they contain details which are anachronistic? Are all the characters dressed in the same period? Are elements of costume design reflected in the set design?

Try to make your descriptions of the costumes active as well – describing the movement of fabrics or *how* someone wears something – is the suit fitted or does it hang limply? Does the dress she is wearing emphasise her formality or her sensuality? Does the material work in the light in a specific way? Are his trousers tattered or grimy?

You should take great care not to merely provide a list of costumes but to relate them in a meaningful way to the character who wears them.

However meticulously described, the audience is not likely to remember every detail. Think whether there is time to describe any costume changes in the course of the play, and whether there are revelations that should be left to the moment – in *My Fair Lady*, for example, it would be a shame to include Eliza Doolittle's transformation from flower girl to duchess in the notes as your audience would miss the 'Wow!' factor when she appears in her finery.

Clothes tell us a lot about the character of the wearer. Although too much detail will swamp the listener, certain specific details will speak volumes about a particular character.

It's useful to give people an idea how many characters there are. If, however, there's a cast of twenty two, it's less daunting to the listener if you tell them there are seven main characters and several minor ones, and then they know that the minor ones are likely to be grouped together and given less detailed descriptions. It's sometimes useful to describe characters in the order in which they speak, but it is usually better to group the characters in some way, as this helps your audience to remember them. This may be by mentioning 'important' characters first. You might group a particular family together, for instance; or two good friends; or those who live in this place and those who are visiting; or the Trojans and their opponents, the Greeks.

Try to group characters in a way which is meaningful for the production and which gives the audience an idea of the relationships between people.

Set

You should describe the set or settings in which the action takes place. As well as giving an overall impression, you will need to navigate your audience around what is often a complicated space in a way that is clear and logical. Many visually impaired patrons have some sight and so certain features of the set will act as landmarks. Once you have decided on what to call a particular piece of furniture, or a doorway (back door, kitchen door, side door, library door) you should always refer to it that way in your description to give continuity.

You should avoid using theatrical language and referring to the stage, the wings, the flies, to help maintain the illusion that the set is trying to create. There are obvious exceptions to this - where the stage *is* a stage for example, or where the play's designer seeks to draw attention to the set's theatricality. Here, if you do use technical terms, they should be explained in the notes first.

Please note that left and right are given in terms of the audience's left and right.

Your descriptions of the set, furniture and props - like those of the costumes - should reflect the period of the production. Again you will have to assume a certain amount of knowledge but avoid being too technical. Your descriptions should **emphasise the general style** of the designs before focusing on specifics - is the setting realistic? Are certain elements exaggerated? Is it an abstract or fluid space? Does it suggest or represent something? It may have a period feel without being accurate.

In some cases you should describe the mechanics - *how* the stage is transformed during the action - as well as the impression it creates. On the other hand, if there is time to describe the transformation when it is actually happening, it may be better not to spoil the element of surprise or theatricality that the sighted members of the audience will experience.

When describing a room full of furniture and props, **you need to prioritise**. Some articles will be more important than others - you should, for instance, mention objects which are used by characters during the course of the action. But certain other pieces of furniture or props will be there mainly as set dressing - the designer has used them to give an impression. You, too, can afford to be impressionistic.

Rosmersholm

The drawing room is open to us as we take our seats; at 12 metres wide and 10 metres deep, it is a tall, spacious and elegant room, painted with a limewash distemper of a light greeny-grey colour. The floor is of plain Norwegian Spruce painted in the same clean grey. Scattered around are chairs and small occasional tables on which are oil lamps, candles and vases of colourful fresh flowers. The room retains an atmosphere of calm uncluttered spaciousness ...

Some describers like to walk the set before writing the notes to pick out particular details. This can sometimes be arranged with the company or stage manager. Others prefer not to know intricate details because they are concerned they will be over-descriptive. What matters is what the rest of the audience is aware of, rather than your insider knowledge. In one play, a photograph of a school football team on a sideboard was donated by one of the actors and included him as a teenage boy. This is a nice detail, but none of the sighted audience was aware of it and to include it risked foregrounding something that had no importance whatsoever to the play.

Too much detail - even though accurate - can confuse rather than clarify. You need to be able to mention the key elements in a way which is vivid and understandable.

Be on the look out for the details which really sum up the production.

Lighting

Lighting plays a varying part in an audience's understanding of a piece of theatre. It may be used in a literal way to show interior and exterior locations; it may be heightened to reflect the emotional content of the play; it may focus our attention on a particular character; it may move us from place to place - especially where the set is minimal; or it may tell us that time has passed. Again, it is important to describe what the lighting does in a general way - how it functions and fits in with the overall production. Lighting can be so subtle that it is barely noticeable, but it can sometimes become almost like another character in the play.

If there are particular effects - huge shadows being thrown on walls at dramatic moments, for example, you may feel it is important to draw attention to them in the introduction, particularly if there isn't much time to mention them during the performance.

The following is a description of the lighting effects used to create atmosphere during a well-known musical - Les Miserablés.

Les Misérables

The lighting used during the show is highly dramatic and atmospheric – sometimes the stage is a dark void with one character picked out in a soft spotlight, at other times a group of characters is illuminated in cold steely blue. Characters can be lit from a low angle so that they throw out giant shadows as they move. Some crowd scenes are like moving oil paintings, the colours soft and sepia or luminous and gleaming. Smoke effects are used: the air is thick with the gunsmoke of battle, or an all-enveloping mist is pierced by shafts of light as though through the overhead grating of a damp sewer.

Sound

Sound can take us to different locations and it can be a helpful memory aid for the audience to bring back the description of a particular setting. A drone of machinery can take us to a factory, or the sound of crickets to a villa in Spain. If a particular sound effect is used to herald the entrance of a character, such as an ominous rattling signifying the arrival of the ghost of Hamlet's father, you might want to mention it in the notes.

Music

If music is played live during the production, let the audience know where the musicians are sitting. They may remain onstage or sitting in a balcony above, or in the pit, or be unseen until the curtain call. How many musicians are there? If there are only three or four, what sort of instruments do they play?

Practical information

You should say something about the building in which the production is taking place. This can be brief but it is good to give people a sense of their surroundings. Some theatres are works of art in themselves. You should let the audience know what is visible when they first enter the auditorium. Is the stage open to them? Is there a curtain?

You should include details which a sighted audience member may get from programmes, leaflets or other signs in the theatre - such as the duration of the play, how it is divided in term of scenes or acts and how many intervals there are.

You should also include any **warnings** that might be posted outside the auditorium, such as where strobe lighting is used, or where there are gunshots. This will allow your audience to decide whether to bring guide dogs into the auditorium or leave them with theatre staff. If there are gunshots, let them know if they are in the first half or the second, or you may find people sitting on tenterhooks throughout the performance.

You should include some technical information about the delivery of the description, reminding audience members that they can adjust the volume of their headsets during particularly loud passages of music, for instance. For some plays there will be long periods where there is no time or no need to add description. If you warn patrons of this in advance they will not worry that their headset has died in the middle of the play.

You should guide your audience through the production so that they feel confident that they are being given all the information they will need.

If the notes being recorded, you will have to produce two slightly different versions. The version for the tape can afford to be longer, and can include more of the background information from the printed programme, if appropriate.

Delivering the notes

We normally ask the patrons to be in their seats fifteen minutes before the start of the performance, but they will not want to listen throughout. If you finish your notes five minutes before the play starts, don't just stop speaking and leave your audience in silence - **tell them what you are doing and let them know the play will begin shortly.**

Bring them back to what is happening with, "And at the moment ... the curtain conceals ... the kitchen is in shadow ... mist is drifting through the moonlit glade ..." or whatever is appropriate, before you leave them.

If you're not sure how long you have to go before the start of the performance, a useful phrase is, "Please leave your headset switched on, as the performance will begin very shortly."

The **live notes should always begin on time** so that the patrons get used to a regular start time and can make their arrangements for getting into the auditorium in a leisurely way without worrying that they are going to miss something. A foyer announcement to warn patrons that the notes will begin in three minutes also serves to advertise the service to other theatregoers. You should arrange this with Front of House.

Notes should ideally segue into the start of the performance, so it is always useful to write a brief recap of both the characters and settings in case the notes finish several minutes before the performance is due to start. If you are giving a recap, let the audience know you are by a phrase such as "In case you have just joined us ..." so that they don't think it's new information, and can chat to their companions without worrying that they're missing something. You may only have time for a brief sketch of the first setting and the first two characters we meet. Find a word or phrase that sums up your characters – the flirtatious maid, Olive, Felix, the young musician, the elderly matriarch, Mrs Fudge.

If a change of set happens during an interval, it may be appropriate to save your description of the second set (as well as any new characters) until just before the second half. If you do this, warn the audience that there will be brief notes before the beginning of the second half. The recorded tape, though, should include all settings and characters, as well as a cast list and details of production credits, such as the names of director, designer, lighting designer and sound designer.

Do introductory notes have a particular style?

The notes should be written in a style which is consistent with the production. The language you use to describe a modern play for young people, for instance, will not be the same as that used to describe a conventional production of a Greek tragedy.

This is also the case with the delivery of the notes - a more relaxed delivery may be fine for a comedy or pantomime, but not appropriate for a more serious or formal piece.

'Badger watching'

Sometimes there is action taking place onstage as you are reading the introductory notes, such as maids setting tables, or townsfolk strolling in the late afternoon sun. You should let the audience know that this is happening with, "At the moment ..." or they will hear sounds from onstage and wonder what they are. Write a few good descriptive phrases and have them ready to drop in at strategic points or you will sound hesitant and unprepared.

Layout of the notes

This can be done in different ways. The most common way is to put the set first and then the characters, or vice versa, but at times it will help the audience to remember detail if you place the characters in the settings you find them. A description of a hospital ward may give rise to the descriptions of a patient and a nurse, before the patient returns home to her squalid flat, where we meet her flatmates. When she returns to work it is in a scruffy office with a receptionist and her boss. In doing this, however, be careful not to give away anything of the plot.

Reading the notes

If there are two of you working together you will probably want to split the live reading of the notes between you. This gives you an opportunity to familiarise the audience with both of the voices they will hear during the course of the performance. If you are handing over, let the audience know, as there will be a short delay while you swap the headset over and **turn the mic down**, or they will hear every bump. The person who is describing the first half should always take the second half of the notes so that they can trim them as they go if time is short.

Writing vivid, accurate and involving introductions is a key part of the describer's job. Our audience members tell us that the introductory notes are a crucial part of their experience and can create a wonderful sense of anticipation days before the performance. They add to their enjoyment and contribute a great deal to their understanding of the production.