

“not a technique person”

I started my first Essentials class of the year a couple of weeks ago. The first night of class, I introduce a framework called the Five Questions, which helps to organize the process of extracting the given circumstances from the text. It's the kind of exercise that can appear to be simple to the point of being simplistic, not to say tedious.

But there is more to it than meets the eye. Dramatic writing always depends on a relationship between what is made explicit in the text, and what is present through implication and context. The former is very easy to spot, the latter much less so. The things that depend on implication and context are hiding in plain sight, so to speak. So the question is: how do catch sight of those things? Well, there is no foolproof method for seeing what you don't see, but writing down what you do see is a good starting point. Putting stuff in writing can turn the kaleidoscope of the mind, and suddenly you might spot something that you hadn't seen before.

I encourage students to send me their Five Questions documents, and I provide thorough feedback on them, helping the students to see what they may not have seen. I can see from many of the documents submitted that many students don't really see the value of the exercise, because the first submissions are often kind of cursory. When the students get their documents back from me with commentary, I can only hope that they begin to see the value of assuming that there are things in it that are not obvious, and combing it carefully and thoroughly to find those things.

From this new class I started, I received a Five Questions document that was actually a bit more thorough and thoughtful than average. Upon submitting it, its author had said he was “not a technique person, more a just do it and hope it works out kind of guy”, but that he was eager to see what he could

learn over the course of the class. The Five Questions framework is itself a technical exercise: students are asked to answer a set of questions using particular criteria and guidelines. The fact that he had embraced this particular piece of technique in the way that he had suggested to me that he possessed a very important quality, which some have called *grit*: the capacity to contend with adversity and discomfort. He described himself as someone who wasn't comfortable with technique, and yet he dove into this first piece of technique, in which he was asked to write out information about the character in a particular way, for reasons that were probably not yet obvious to him. This willingness to embrace discomfort is very important: it's what is commonly called "getting out of one's comfort zone". It's going forward, toward challenges, in spite of resistance. I recognize the great difficulty of this. It's something that life makes sure that we contend with, sooner or later, and it's usually not easy. But to my mind, it is the single most important quality for acting students to have. Technique by definition is going to ask that you do things in ways **other than** the ways that seem the most likely or plausible to you. That's what it is: technique is a procedure that you follow in order to achieve a certain end. Sometimes, this procedure is going to chafe, it's going to feel like an imposition, like something that cramps our style. This is inevitable. It's the willingness to undergo this, in order to discover what the promise of that technique or procedure might be, in spite of the aspects of it that might seem foreign or unpleasant, that means the difference between an actor who can go beyond his or her inborn capabilities, and one who can't.

Getting better as an actor is not about being a good actor. It's about being a good student.