



CAPTAIN AMERICA: BRAVE NEW WORLD

How To Prepare and Perform a Scene For Auditions and On-Set

By William Mark McCullough



AMERICAN MADE

Introduction

I have made my living as a TV and film actor since 2014. But I spent many years before that struggling to turn my dream of being a professional working actor into a reality.

I studied acting in college and grad school and took numerous acting classes after moving to Los Angeles to pursue my career.

I found most approaches to acting to be overly complicated requiring massive amounts of time to “prepare” for the scene. I recall getting a two line audition for a police procedural and feeling the need to write a ten page backstory for my character. Keep in mind, my character’s name was “Cop #2.”

I would break my audition scenes down into beats, create action verbs, objectives, super objectives, choose some occurrence from my past for my emotional substitution, etc. I could tell you what my character had for breakfast that morning and what their life goals were.

Almost 100% of my attention during my preparation was on MY character and what I planned for my character to do and feel during the scene.

I meticulously planned out every reaction, practiced exactly how I would say every line, always striving to deliver a “perfect” audition performance.

When I walked into a casting office to do my audition (this was before the advent of self-tape auditions) my head was swirling with all of the choices and decisions I had made about performing the scene.

I would do my best to replicate the performance I had already done a hundred times in my living room. I delivered a fully planned “performance.”

This approach always resulted in me getting in my head during the audition and feeling no real connection with my reader. I was simply going through the motions during the scene rather than living in the moment.

What I missed was the magic that happens in the moment - the little surprises that organically happen when you allow the scene to unfold rather than push through with a pre-planned emotional roadmap.

I eventually threw away my old approach to preparing for an audition or a scene on set.

When I started using my new approach I started booking jobs in hit TV shows and in big budget feature films.

Let me be clear: my approach to preparing a scene is not the “correct” approach. Rather, it is a simple, easy approach that focuses on having fun and truly living in the moment of the scene.

Give it a try and see if it works for you. You should never be dogmatic about your acting. Be wary of any acting teacher who tells you their approach is the only “correct” way.

Every acting approach, whether it is Meisner, Stanislavski, Strasberg, Adler, Hagen or Chekhov, has adherents who are successful actors. But many actors will study these various acting styles and find they aren’t effective. Yet, they will continue with endless acting classes trying to “master” the



particular acting method. This is great for acting teachers, because it ensures students remain in the class for long periods, but it is harmful to the acting students.

If you study a particular acting style and find it doesn't allow you to deliver powerful, compelling, truthful performances, you should try a different approach.

When you train with any acting teacher or study any acting approach, use what works and discard what doesn't.

That goes for my approach to acting as well. Use what resonates with you and helps you deliver bookable auditions and throw away those things that aren't helpful.

I'm no guru. I'm just a professional working actor who has found an acting approach that has worked extremely well for me and hundreds of my students through the years.

I wish you all the best on your acting journey. I hope you find what I share helpful as you prepare for your auditions and performances on set.



General Concepts

Be yourself.

There is nothing in the world more unique, magical and wonderfully flawed than you. Trust that bringing that to every role will impart an authenticity and spark that will make the role come alive.

This doesn't mean you will be right for every role, but it does mean that the roles you are right for will bristle with electricity and magnetism.

Too many actors create a chasm between themselves and the character they are portraying by believing they need to "create" the character. They focus on how the character should walk, talk and behave.

If they have an audition to play an FBI agent they think to themselves, "How would an FBI agent act in this moment?" This often leads to performances that are stilted and derivative.

I graduated from law school in Washington, DC and had the chance to know quite a few FBI agents. Some of them were smart, others not so much. Some agents were kind and thoughtful, whereas others were world class jerks.

My point is there are no inherent traits for FBI agents. They are all human beings with all the variabilities, flaws and positive traits all of us have. This is true for ALL characters.

Instead of thinking of the character as separate and apart from you, I suggest you place yourself in the circumstances of the scene. So, rather than trying to emulate a theoretical FBI agent (which is almost always based on tropes you've seen in TV shows and films) instead try approaching the scene as yourself who HAPPENS to be an FBI agent.

Bringing yourself to every role ensures the character's humanity shines through rather than the same old boring stereotypes that so many actors display in their auditions.

Authenticity resonates. Industry professionals and audiences will take notice of performances that feel like real people truly living in the circumstances of the scene.

Allowing your true self to be on full display in every audition ensures the character will have intriguing flaws and emotional depth.

Many actors ask me how to make a "bold choice" in their audition to stand out from the crowd. They are often thinking of some way to deliver a line or do an action that is different from other actors. My answer is always the same, the boldest choice you can make as an actor is to have the courage to bring yourself to the role.

Don't plan any of your emotional reactions that may occur during the scene.

Let emotions occur naturally in the moment. Focus on being present and connected to the other characters and the circumstances and trust that as a human being you will naturally have emotional responses that are truthful and compelling. "Pushed" or "fake" emotions that are planned ahead of time almost always ring false and make you look like an actor performing a scene rather than a person living in a moment.

If I have complicated physical actions or have to use a prop I'm unfamiliar with during the scene I will practice those to make sure it feels and looks natural. But I NEVER plan my emotional journey that happens in a scene.

I allow that journey to happen naturally DURING the scene. If you are connected to the other characters, know the environment and relationships and have created appropriate mini-memories (covered later), you will allow yourself to truly live in the moment and experience the emotions naturally as they occur.

And remember, there is no "correct" emotional response in any situation. Human beings are unique and respond in different ways in any circumstance.

When my dad passed away I couldn't cry, but one of my sisters couldn't stop crying for six months. Neither of our emotional responses were "correct." We just had different emotional responses to a given circumstance.

Acting in a scene is no different. Just because the writer says your character gets angry or cries or yells, doesn't mean you have to do that in the scene.

When a writer creates a scene they are describing what they think the character will do. But our jobs as actors is not to blindly follow the emotional journey laid out by the writer. Instead, we should have authentic emotions that are appropriate to the tone and genre of the project.

If we do that, we have done our job as actors. When casting directors, directors, producers, studio and network executives are reviewing our auditions they want to see people having authentic reactions and emotions. They don't want to see fake, but "correct" emotions.

Allowing emotions to occur in the moment without them feeling forced will result in auditions that the decision makers will take notice of.

And this approach will also be more fun. I love the little emotional surprises that pop up during a scene. The more you practice the approach the easier it becomes to be free and truly alive in the scene.

Your main focus during preparation should be on what happened before the scene.

Obviously, you should study the scene and know what is happening, who the characters are and what your relationship to them is.

However, the majority of your audition or scene preparation will be focused on the moments and relationships that lead your character to the scene.

How did you end up here? What relationships and experiences caused you to be in this very place at this time with this character/s. If you know how you got there, it is easier to be free and in the moment and allow wonderfully spontaneous emotions and actions to occur.

When preparing the scene you should ask yourself the following questions.

-What is my relationship and history with the character/s in the scene?

-Are there characters who aren't in the scene but are critical to why my character is currently in this scene? If so, what is my relationship and history with those missing characters?

-What events or circumstances directly lead my character to being in the current situation of the scene?

Let's say I have an audition in which my wife and I are celebrating our five year anniversary at a fancy French restaurant. During the scene my wife tells me she wants a divorce and my character is shocked and devastated.

When preparing the scene I would read the scene and be familiar with what happens. But I would not plan how my character emotionally reacts in the scene or the particular way he talks or acts in the scene.

The majority of my preparation time would be focused on the circumstances that led me to being at dinner with my wife.

I would focus on the history of my relationship with my wife. How we met. Our first kiss. Watching her walk down the aisle of the church on our wedding day. The night we kissed outside the Eiffel Tower on our one year anniversary.

Using mini-memories I would create a vibrant, gripping emotional connection with the woman I'm going to dinner with.

Just before starting the scene I would not be thinking about how I have planned the scene to play out.

Instead, the only thing I would be thinking at the beginning of my scene is how much I love this woman and how excited I am to celebrate our five year anniversary.

Then I would jump into the scene and allow myself to have whatever emotional reactions happen to occur in the moment.

By focusing on the events and relationships that led to the start of the scene I can simply exist in the circumstances of the scene as they unfold and allow authentic emotions to occur.

When my wife tells me she wants a divorce I may be devastated and try to hide my pain with anger. Perhaps I yell at her. Maybe I will be shocked into silence. I may break down in tears. I have no idea how I may emotionally respond. Just like I had no idea how I would emotionally react when my dad died.

But what I am sure of is that whatever I feel and however I react will be truthful and organic. And the decision makers watching my audition will sense that they are watching someone have an authentic emotional reaction **IN THE SCENE** rather than watching an actor present a planned performance.

This is what helps book you the job.

Use real people language, not actor speak.

Get used to talking about the scene like a real person using words everyone would know and understand if placed in the same circumstance. Using “actor speak” separates us from a grounded sense of the scene. It can make the approach to the scene feel cerebral and disconnected rather than organic and fluid.

Instead of asking, “What is my character’s motivation?” ask “What do I want?”

Instead of “What is the subtext of the scene?” ask “Do I want something that I’m not saying out loud?”

Many actors use highly technical acting terms when preparing a scene. I urge you to break that habit. In real life we don’t approach situations thinking this way and using this type of language, so why should we do it in our acting scenes?

Think of the scene the way normal people would think if they were in the circumstances of the scene and trust your experience as a human being will guide you in an honest way.

There is no “correct” emotion in a situation.

Acting teachers often push students to deliver a particular emotion in a moment during a scene. Always remember – there are no “correct” emotions.

Human beings are complex creatures and sometimes respond in uncharacteristic or inappropriate ways. That is fine. Embrace it. You should never be a slave to the screen writer’s thoughts as to what emotions are appropriate in the scene. Just because he or she wrote it, that doesn’t mean it’s the most powerful or truthful emotion one could have in that situation.

This doesn’t mean a director or casting director won’t request a particular emotion on set or during an audition or callback. Hopefully your truthful, organic emotion will satisfy them whether it is what they expected or not. But sometimes you will have to achieve a requested emotion.

Attempt to do so in as natural a way as possible. But whatever you do never “fake” an emotion. It is better to feel nothing and let the audience put upon you what they think you are feeling rather than to do something fake and let the audience see that it isn’t real.

Your character's memories must be concrete, not just words you say.

If your character describes a moment from their past, you must create a concrete visual memory of that moment. When we share stories from our past, we see the event taking place in our mind's eye, and we describe what we see. This is exactly what you must do in a scene.

If your character describes an embarrassing moment from high school, you must visualize that moment in detail in your mind beforehand. If you can see it in your mind, the viewer can see it in theirs.

If you simply say the words without accompanying visual images the moment will ring as false.

Men do not want to cry – unless they are actors.

For the male actors, you must never want to cry in a scene. The only men who ever want to cry are actors performing a scene.

Do everything you can to fight back the tears. If they break through with you trying your hardest to hold them back, the moment will feel devastating to the viewer. Your performance will be much more powerful and ring more true if you avoid the trap of “trying” to cry.

Receiving Notes At a Callback or on Set.

You will often get notes on your performance at a callback or while working on set. When you get a note to try something different in a scene never take it as you did something wrong.

When you receive notes during a callback it is often the director wanting to see if you can be flexible and adaptive on set. They want to make sure you haven't “locked in” a particular performance.

When you get notes on set it is often the director wanting different options in the editing room.

When you receive a note take it as an opportunity to play the scene in a different way. Allow yourself to implement the note from a place of fun and exploration.

I was once doing an intense scene with Tom Cruise on the set of “American Made.” Cruise told me what he was looking for prior to us starting the scene. I did the scene with his notes in mind.

Cruise then gave me a different set of notes for the scene. I did it and he followed up with different notes.

After five or six times doing the scene with Cruise giving different notes each time, I blurted out in frustration, “Tom, what do you want?”

Cruise responded, “Options.”

That is almost always what they are looking for. Options.

So, never take getting a note as a bad thing or a negative comment on your prior take. It is just an opportunity to give them different options.



Have fun!

Enjoy the process and have fun. If you are having fun performing the scene, the viewer will have fun watching it.

When preparing a scene I never ask myself what I think the casting director or director is looking for in the scene. I only ask myself one question: What sounds fun to me?

Acting should be fun. It should take us back to playing make-believe as children. If you were looking to do a job that wasn't fun, there are lots of options out there for you. But acting isn't one of them.

Too many actors lose their sense of fun with auditions. This leads to safe, boring performances. Always allow your inner child to have fun when auditioning or performing on set.

How to memorize your lines.

Many actors get overwhelmed and freaked out about memorizing their lines. They hyper focus on getting the lines "perfect" and in the process lose the magic of the scene.

For dramas I work diligently to memorize the lines exactly as written, but I don't freak out about it. If I slightly change a line or two, I don't worry about it. Auditions are not memorization contests.

And I certainly don't worry about it on set. If I inadvertently change a line and it's an issue, the script supervisor will tell me. But I can assure you, it is almost never an issue.

I have slightly changed my lines on huge budget films and it has never been an issue. When I was working on "Captain America: Brave New World" there was a line that didn't feel right when I said it, so I changed it. After the first take the director came up to me and asked why I changed the line. I explained the wording felt unnatural to me and he responded, "ok." That was it.

I would be willing to say there have been few times where I have said all the lines in a film or TV show exactly as they are written. And it has almost never been an issue.

When it has been an issue it has almost always been on an independent film where the director is also the writer and he or she feels the script is precious. In those situations, just do the scene again and strive to get the words out as written.

This is not the case with comedies, however. When auditioning for a comedy or performing on the set of a comedy you should always be word perfect. Comedy writing is very precise and the joke could be lost if you change the lines - even a little.

Here is how I memorize my lines.

I record the lines using my phone's voice recorder app. I create a different voice for each character, so I know which character is saying what line while I listen.

As I'm memorizing the lines I say them flat with no emotion or inflection. The key here is to NOT memorize how to say the lines, but rather just get the lines in your head.

I'll cover this in detail later in this document, but you don't want to memorize your performance. The performance should happen organically in the moment DURING your audition or during your performance on set.

I listen to the recording of the scene over and over. I usually break it up into 20-30 second chunks. Once I've memorized a section I add an additional 20-30 seconds until I've memorized the entire scene.

You will be shocked at how quickly you can learn your lines using this approach. When I'm working on a TV show or film, I usually learn my lines on the drive to set each morning.

I never memorize my lines far in advance because scripts often change last minute and I find it more difficult to unlearn a scene and re-learn it with the new lines.

I do familiarize myself with my scenes well before filming them, I just don't lock the lines down in my memory until the night before or morning of the shoot.



THE WALKING DEAD (AMC)

MY STEPS TO PREPARE A SCENE:

Read the character description.

It's helpful to know what they are looking for, however, I don't drastically change who I am or what I bring to the table, based on the character description. I'm not a circus monkey. I'm auditioning for my career, not this one role. I prefer to show the casting director the wonderfully unique, interesting, and flawed human that is me rather than try to transform into someone that isn't authentic or truthful.

It is better to show the casting director who you are and the unique qualities you offer as an actor – AND IT NOT BE RIGHT FOR THE ROLE – than to try to transform into something you are not, which almost always looks mediocre and untruthful.

Yes, you can do this for student and short films and for tiny co-star roles. But to build a long-term career that is constantly pushing you to higher and higher levels, you must bring your unique truth.

One of the reasons I read the character description is to see if the role requires an accent and to determine the appropriate wardrobe for the audition.

If my character is a drug dealer living in a trailer park I will dress differently for the audition than if he is a sleazy lawyer.

Character breakdowns can also provide helpful insight into what the character may have done, but is not obvious in the text of the scene.

Let's say you get an audition for "Law and Order" playing someone accused of murder and the audition scene has the detectives interrogating you. Many times it will not be clear from the scene whether your character actually committed the murder or not. The character breakdown will sometimes state whether your character is actually guilty of the crime. This will help inform you emotionally as you prepare the scene.

The character description offers guidance and sometimes useful information about the character not able to be gleaned from the scene itself. Use it as such, but don't feel the need to blindly follow it.

Research the writer, director, producers, as well as the network if it's a TV show.

You do this research to get a sense of the tone and style of the show or film. How you act in a Nickelodeon show will usually be different than how you act in an HBO series – even if the circumstances are similar. By looking at other projects the writer and director have worked on you can get a sense for their style.

If you are auditioning for a TV series that is currently released, you should watch at least a few minutes of the show to get a sense of the tone and style.

For low budget projects this research is to help ensure the folks you may work with are safe and legitimate. Always do an internet search of directors and producers to make sure they don't have an unsavory background. If your gut says “stay away” then follow your gut. There will always be other projects to work on. Your safety is the priority.



Carefully read the scene.

Before you start to analyze a scene or memorize the lines, first just read it as if you were an audience member watching it on the screen.

After reading the scene ask yourself the following questions. If the answer isn't provided in the script, you must answer it for yourself. Remember – you can't act an "I guess" or a "maybe." You must make concrete, specific choices.

-What's actually happening in the scene? Not hidden subtext, but rather what is clearly happening. What are the characters doing and what are the circumstances they are in?

Don't overcomplicate this process by looking for deep hidden meanings and motives. Keep it simple and straightforward. How would your grandmother describe what's happening in the scene?

-Who are the other people in the scene? What is your relationship to them? Are there characters who are not in the scene, but have a strong impact on the scene? What is your relationship to those missing characters?

-Where does the scene take place?

The environment can affect you in the scene. Is it a busy restaurant or in your living room? Those things often matter.

An argument with your spouse at your house versus your in-laws' house will have a dramatic effect on the way you act in the scene. Flirting with someone at a bar versus during a church service will impact how you approach the scene.

-What is the environment like?

Is it hot, cold, humid, loud, or eerily quiet? Let these factors affect you in the scene. When acting on set it is usually easier because the location and environment are there for you. Auditions require you to imagine them.



-How are you dressed?

Are you wearing a suit or a tank top and shorts? The way we move and interact with others is often affected by how we are dressed.

You don't have to fully dress in wardrobe for your audition, but I would strive to suggest the character's wardrobe in what you choose to wear. Don't make it hard for the casting director, director, or producers to see you in the role.

This does not mean you should dress in costume. If auditioning for a doctor, don't wear a white lab coat with a stethoscope around your neck. If auditioning for a soldier don't wear full military fatigues. Wearing a costume can make you come across as desperate and amateurish.

Instead, dress to SUGGEST the character. If auditioning for a police officer, wear a long sleeve blue dress shirt. If auditioning for a lawyer, wear a suit.

-What happened to your character right before the scene started?

Carry that energy into the scene. This doesn't have to be overly complicated. Keep it simple. If your character was running just before the scene starts you may want to begin the scene slightly out of breath.

MINI-MEMORIES

This is a method I developed that will allow you to quickly prepare for a scene. Having these mini-memories embedded in your subconscious will allow you to naturally access emotions during the scene without the need to plan them ahead of time.

This approach is meant to make preparing scene work easier, faster and more efficient. It is not supposed to be arduous, overwrought and difficult.

On many occasions on set I have had the lines in my scene changed either right before we start filming or during the filming of the scene. This never rattles me, because I never plan how I'm going to say my lines anyway.

Most of the preparation time for my scenes is spent thinking about the moments and relationships that lead me to the beginning of the scene. With all of that rich history in my gut, the scene will be dynamic and alive – without me planning how I'm going to deliver the lines ahead of time.

I have witnessed actors with only three lines get fired from set because the lines were changed right before we started filming and they freaked out.

They had spent days or weeks practicing exactly how they were going to say their lines and when given new lines at the last minute they fell apart. Don't let this happen to you!

I generally create three mini-memories for each scene I'm performing. There is nothing particularly special about the number three. Create as many or few as you like and is helpful to you. But I wouldn't go overboard, as the purpose is to make scene preparation more efficient.

Definition Of Mini-Memory: A two second memory of a moment that captures an important aspect of your character's relationship with a character in the scene you are performing. It can also capture an important aspect of your character's relationship to a character who is not in the scene but has a strong impact on the scene.

EXAMPLE:

The Scene

You (your character) has agreed to meet with the man who killed your teenage daughter in a drunk driving accident.

The Steps

What's Happening In the Scene: You are meeting the man who killed your daughter in a drunk driving accident five years ago. He had reached out asking for the meeting. At first the meeting is tense and awkward. You ask him what it was like being in prison for four years. He shares that he is overwhelmed with guilt and feels he deserves to die. He asks you to forgive him. You can't do it. You stand up and walk away as he cries.

Relationships: There are at least two hugely impactful relationships in this scene, perhaps more. The most powerful relationship is with your daughter. How did you get along? Were you close? Were you distant? Was the relationship formal or relaxed? There are usually no right or wrong answers, but you must answer them. You must have a concrete idea of your relationship with your daughter.

The other relationship is with the killer. Since this is your first time meeting him, your relationship is with the idea of him. Perhaps seeing him in the courtroom or hearing him on the stand or in an interview. Maybe you read an article about him and his background.

You may also include your relationship with your spouse.

How did the death of your daughter affect your relationship with your spouse? Did the trial and publicity have an impact? Did you remain together or divorce as a result of your daughter's death. You must know.

Location: Where is the meeting taking place? Is it a coffee shop, bar, restaurant or park? Is the place crowded or empty? Is it likely you will run into someone you know while there? Does it feel private or very public?

Environment: Is it hot, cold or comfortable? Is it loud or deathly quiet? Let those conditions affect you.

Wardrobe: What are you wearing? Did you dress up for this meeting or did you come right after work or the gym?

Moment Before: What were you doing right before you walked into this meeting? Were you crying in your car? Listening to a podcast trying your hardest not to think about the meeting? Were you on a phone call with your spouse defending your decision to meet? Whatever it is, carry that energy into the beginning of the scene.

Mini-Memories:

Memory 1: (to capture the love you feel for your daughter)
You are standing in the delivery room. Your heart is pounding. The nurse places your baby daughter in your

arms. You look down into her eyes. You can't believe you created something so beautiful and innocent. At that moment you know she is the reason you were put on this earth. To take care of and protect this little girl.

The entire memory should last no more than two seconds. It is too hard to deeply visualize a moment that lasts much longer than a few seconds.

Memory 2: (to add layers to your relationship with your daughter)

You are standing in your living room; face flushed with anger. Your daughter, dressed in what you believe is a too revealing outfit, slams the front door as she rushes out. You had obviously been arguing about what she's wearing (No need to visualize that. The emotions resulting from the argument is all you need.). This is the last time you see her alive. This memory should be two seconds long.

Memory 3: (to capture your relationship to the killer)

You are sitting in the courtroom. You are exhausted. The tears are all cried out. You feel numb inside. The killer is on the stand. No tears. No sense of remorse. It looks almost as if he has a tiny smile on his face. You hear him say, "It was just an accident. That's all." This memory should last for about two seconds.

Process: Answer the above questions in detail. Then sit in a private, quiet place and visualize the mini-memories over and over until they are a part of you.

Do not “think” about them. “Live” them. No need for a five page back story. No need for emotional substitution, action verbs or overarching obstacles. You are creating real, visceral memories that will be bouncing around inside of you as you do the scene.

When you start the scene just focus on the killer sitting in front of you. And LIVE IN THE MOMENT, trusting that the mini-memories are inside of you and will affect you in a real, dynamic way. Don’t judge yourself doing the scene. There is no right or wrong emotions – as long as they are authentic. That’s it.

I hope you find this approach helpful in your journey. It changed my life and my career. It made my auditions and performances fun and exciting and never boring for me.

If after practicing this approach for a while you find it doesn’t work for you, then seek out a different approach that does work.

We should never be dogmatic about our acting. Auditioning and acting is an art, not a science. At the end of the day all that matters is that we deliver powerful, compelling performances in our auditions and on set.

If you ever need assistance with audition prep or a career counseling session feel free to email me.

Email: assistant@WorkingActorsLab.com

You can check out my demo reel, background and services offered at my website - www.WorkingActorsLab.com



You want me to just
HAND OVER \$350,000?

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