

# GCSE DRAMA

## Set design

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Teaching guide: set design

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## Set design

### Introduction

Set design is the creation of the performance space. This can include designing rooms, furniture, outdoor places or abstract spaces. Set design responds to the needs of the production and can suggest – creative solutions – to problems presented by the text. The set communicates with the audience: it is not just a location for the play, but a vital part of what the audience will experience, feel and think. Set design can mean a large scale, spectacular design, but it can also mean a clever solution with very limited budget or resources.

### Activity 1: Inspiration boards

Inspiration boards let you gather together materials and images that will help you develop your design. Professional designers use reference points to develop their ideas, so mood and inspiration boards are a good starting point.

Start by thinking about or discussing the play: what locations are used? What images do these locations conjure up in your head? What moods do you think the play needs?

Then spend some time gathering images: try a Google Image search or look through magazines, take photographs or look in libraries.

Attach the images to a large piece of paper or card. Use Blu tack so you can move the images around if you choose.

Add notes, comments and quotes from the characters.

You can use the inspiration board as a reference point when you start designing your set: choose one image and make that the beginning of your design.

### Way in

Theatre sets include furniture, scenery and properties (props). Think about a live performance you have seen: what scenery, furniture and props were used? How did the scenery, furniture and props help you to understand the performance? What did they tell you about the play's social, historical or cultural context? Did they create a certain mood or atmosphere?

'A theatre set should: suggest the style and tone of the whole production, create mood and atmosphere, give clues as to the specific time and place of the action, offer creative possibilities for the movement and the grouping of actors'.

American Association of Community Theatre.

### Activity 2: Where is the audience?

Thinking about the audience is a big part of the set designer's role. Consider different audience configurations:

#### End on or proscenium arch:

All the audience are seated together facing the stage.

#### In-the-round:

The audience surround the actors in a circle of square.

#### Traverse:

The audience sit in two lines facing each other.

#### Thrust:

The audience sit on three sides of the stage.

**Try sitting in these different configurations: what is it like to be able to see other audience members? What would be the most interesting and useful configurations for the play you are working on?**

### Discussion ideas

How real does a set design need to look for the audience to understand your intentions? Find three different designs for the same play: which works best and why? What challenges does the play you are studying present for a designer?

Some plays rely on set changes; others use a composite set. Which do you think would be most effective for the play you are studying?

### Activity 3: What is the space like?

Set designers need to understand the space they are using. Designers often work with scale models (called **white card models** or **model boxes**) to try out their ideas before a design is commissioned or built. Working in three dimensions, rather than just drawing, will help you to understand space thoroughly and work out how the actors will relate to their surroundings. Working to scale ensures that your set is the correct size for your actors.

1. Measure your stage space. Take your measurements in cm.
2. Decide the best scale to work to: most designers use 1:25 scales, but you can also use 1:50 if the space is limited. 1:25 means that 1cm, on your model stands for 25cm in real life.
3. Divide your stage measurements by 25 (or 50, if you are using 1:50 scale.) Write down these new measurements.
4. Draw your stage using the new measurements: this is a 1:25 scale drawing of the stage space.
5. Try making a scale person or object (like a tree or chair) to stand on your stage. Use your person or object to work out how much space you have on your stage: how many actors could comfortably be on stage at the same time.

### Professional example: Kneehigh

Kneehigh's production of *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (2011, designed by Lez Brotherston) helps the audience to understand where the action takes place using small models of buildings. These begin on the stage floor and are later suspended above the stage. The windows in the model light up to show the audience where the scenes are taking place. The set shows that you can find creative ways to tell your audience where the play is set: you don't always have to be literal. Kneehigh's notes on the design say: 'The set has been designed by Lez Brotherston, and is flexible so that it can show different situations easily. It is representative rather than trying to be lifelike: Small models of buildings hang in the space and the rigging is exposed. Neon signs also help to differentiate between places.'

Find out more [here](#).

### Activity 4: Making a model box

Model boxes don't have to be complicated or expensive: any box with three sides will work. If your box has low sides, like a shoe box, use cardboard to build them up. You can make the box look like our own performance space (even to scale) or you can make a generic theatre.

Using black card or painting the box black gives a good starting point and looks like many black box studio theatres. Rest thin wooden dowels or kebab sticks across the top of the box so you can hang scenery using black cotton.

### Design tip

Model boxes can be made entirely of white card or paper (called **white card models**, usually an early stage in the designer's process) or fully painted. Many designers use models, especially white card models, to try out a lot of different ideas before settling on a final design.

### Find out more...

- Kneehigh:

[kneehigh.co.uk/](http://kneehigh.co.uk/)

- American Association of Community Theatre stage design resources:

[aact.org/set-designer](http://aact.org/set-designer)

- Society of British Theatre Designers:

[theatredesign.org.uk/](http://theatredesign.org.uk/)

