

## SCREEN ACTING TIPS – A SHORT GUIDE TO SUCCESS\*

### I. Basic Screen Acting Etiquette:

1. Always keep going until the director shouts “Cut!” and then keep on acting for a bit.
2. If you mess up a line, keep going until the director call a halt to the take. Let it be HIS decision.
3. Do not stop a take for **any** reason, except for possible injury or death.
4. Never look directly into the camera lens unless specifically requested to do so.
5. Never ask the director what size of shot it is – ask the camera operator.
6. Hit your mark! Being in the right place is often more important than saying the right line.
7. Maintain your concentration and eyelines all through the tedium of lineup and rehearsal; it helps both your fellow actors **and** the crew.
8. An actor only has status between “Action!” and “Cut!” Exception: A star may have it all the time.
9. Never say you do not want to play a role; say that you are unavailable. Never say “No,” say “Maybe” instead.

### II. The Camera Lens:

1. Generally, ignore the camera lens; let it “find and reveal” you.
2. Don’t merely cheat an eyeline, **motivate** it.
3. If both your eyes cannot “see” the camera lens, your face will appear to be obscured.
4. Keep on an imaginary narrow path that stretches out from the front of the camera. Remember that shots are composed in depth, not width.
5. In a 3-shot, put the lens in the middle of the gap, not yourself.
6. If you have trouble hitting a mark, line up 2 objects at the final position you have to hit. Establish a “web.”
7. Shoulders angled toward the camera often look better than straight-on ones.

### III. The Frame:

1. When doing commercials, cheat all business, hands (gestures), and important props (product) up into the “hot” area in closeups.
2. Adjust your acting style within the frame according to the size of shot:
  - a. Long Shot = large gestures/scale – back of the house (theatre)
  - b. Medium Shot = smaller scale, intimate arena theatre, theatrical reality.
  - c. Medium Close Up = Actual reality; the real thing
  - d. Extreme Close Up = Very intimate; think it, put all concentration/energy into your face.
3. Be prepared to stand embarrassing close when acting and speaking with other characters.
4. There is no reality outside the frame; time and/or distance outside the frame may be expanded or contracted.

### IV. Vocal Tips:

1. Project only as far as your fellow actor(s).
2. Intensity can be created by increasing enunciation and pace, **not** volume.
3. When the camera is moving with you (tracking), talk fast but move slow.
4. If you are told to tone it all down, try reducing **only** your volume but keeping the scale of your gestures (such notes usually refer to the voice).
5. Be aware that when speaking with a strong accent there is a tendency to speak louder – don’t.
6. With a studio audience, if they can hear you without the benefit of microphones, you are probably speaking too loudly.
7. Never project louder than the star (or regulars on a series). They set the style for the program.
8. When speaking at low levels, all other sounds seem too loud, so take care with all footsteps, clattering cups, newspaper rustling – even breathing.
9. When speaking at low levels, do not lose energy or adopt a slower pace.
10. As the scene builds, you would expect the voices to rise, but since the shots are liable to get tighter, you have to square the circle by getting more intense – and quieter – at the same time.
11. Gently ask if you are going to be in a contained 2-shot, or if they are going to cross-cut with reverses, in which case be prepared to **not** overlap dialogue.

## V. Acting for the Camera:

1. Your main acting note is the **you** were given the part, so work your looks, personality, and background into your performance. Use **yourself**. That is what they purchased.
2. The shots the director chooses are in themselves acting notes, so obey their implicit instructions:
  - a. Long Shot = allow your **body** to do the talking. (Be bigger).
  - b. Reaction shot = **do** a reaction (even if you feel you are “pulling faces”).
  - c. Two-shot + **react** as you listen to the other actor.
  - d. Close-up = put your thoughts onto your **face**.
  - e. Close-up of your hand holding a prop = channel your acting and thoughts into **that**.
3. Do **all** your acting to an **Audience of One** – the other player (the camera will pick you up).
4. Create good acting reasons for all your pieces of business (including camera-motivating ones).
5. Learn your lines well. They should fit you like a glove. If they don’t, and you don’t have the rehearsal time to create the character who would say those lines, then ask to change them.
6. Find positive ways of communicating negative thoughts.
7. Give yourself something to do **after** a shot ends!!! This will keep your face alive right to the end of the take.
8. Let your inner voice give you those continuous instructions that silent movie actors got from their directors’ megaphones.
9. Let an acting impulse that would lead to a move on stage lead to a gesture or look on the screen.
10. When the camera is on you in a single shot, it is as if you were alone on a stage and all the other performers were in the wings: **now** how do you act?

## VI. The Editor:

1. The better your continuity, the easier it is for the editor to cut to you for your best moments.
2. Editors like to cut on movements, so put some in before one of your important bits of acting.
3. Mark changes of thought with appropriate pieces of business.
4. During a speech, look at the other characters. The editor needs your “eyeflashes” to motivate cuts.
5. Reactions don’t have to be logical or consistent. The editor is only looking for a slice of a good reaction, and several different ones give him/her a better choice (to cut to you!).

## VII. Reactions and Business:

1. React before you speak, and react to the upcoming thought. This is best done on the intake of breath before the line.
2. React **while** others are speaking – on screen we watch the listening character.
3. The best moments are nonverbal ones – so give yourself **time**.
4. Learn all your lines and business in advance of the shoot **very very well**. During the shoot you will be concentrating on all the **new** things, such as remembering camera angles and hitting marks. But also be prepared to change lines and business at the very last moment – be flexible in a **very** cooperative way.
5. Pace consists of continuous events, **not** continuous speaking.
6. Fully motivate any large reactions. Don't reduce your size, increase your believability.
7. Remember the camera cannot follow fast movements, so lift that cup slowly, gently rise up out of that chair.
8. In a multicamera studio a red light means the camera is on, so keep a reaction on your face until it has been sampled by that camera.
9. Eyes can be very effective. Try looking up as well as down, especially when "listening" to another character. Some try looking from one eye to the other.
10. At an interview and reading, plan at least one major reaction in the middle of a reading. Remember to react during the "feed" lines, and to keep your eyes **up**.

## VIII. Some Final Thoughts:

1. To come across as truthful and believable needs both talent, technique, **and** brains.
2. Don't panic over any problem. There has never been a trouble-free shoot, and anyway tomorrow's problem is already in the mail.
3. Don't do today's job as an audition for tomorrow's. Do it because **this** is what you want to do today. Play for the moment at hand. Concentrate on today's acting.
4. All rules are made to be broken – so **know which rules you are breaking!** And have a good reason for doing so.
5. If screen acting is going to be a very important part of your career, find out how to **enjoy** and relish it all. If you allow it, it can (and **should**) be a lot of fun.

\* Adapted from "The Famous Screen Acting Checklist" in *SECRETS OF SCREEN ACTING*, by Patrick Tucker, Routledge, 1994.