

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST BY OSCAR WILDE

AUDITION TECHNIQUE

1. Read an overview of the play. Research the historical context of the play. Have a firm foundation in what the play is about. Answer the questions: what is the play's purpose? What is the playwright portraying? How does the socio-cultural setting of the play impact your understanding of the plot, characters, and author's purpose?
2. Choose a character to portray. Understand his or her purpose in the play. Conduct a character interview with yourself. (Consider the 5 W's: Who are you? What are you like? When does this story take place in your life? Where do you live? Why are you saying and doing the things you do? What is your purpose in terms of the play?)
3. Prepare your character's monologue. Place the monologue into the context of the show as best you can. Mark dramatic beats (places where you should pause). Translate your monologue into modern-day English. Sing your monologue to explore different uses of inflection. Add actions to each of your statements. To memorize, associate your statements with images. Perform your monologue in the mirror. Watch for bad stage habits (fidgeting hands, shifting of weight, tense shoulders, "teenage" posture). Perform your monologue for others and make sure you are projecting and clearly announce all of your words. Practice in order to be confident, comfortable, and natural in what you do.
4. Audition Day: Arrive to your audition promptly (five minutes early). Remain calm and pleasant. When you are called into the audition space, enter the room full of energy and smiling. Slate (introduce your monologue in the following manner): Hello! My name is (insert first name) (insert last name). Today I will be portraying (insert character's name) from (insert play's name) by (insert author's first name) (insert author's last name). Take a slight pause to get into character. (Do not look down at the ground or up at the sky before your monologue. Calmly and without theatrics get into character.) Never look directly at the adjudicating panel. Have a soft focus just above their heads. Look out as if you are onstage. When you are finished, take a brief pause and calmly come out of your character. Wait to see if the panel has any questions. If they do not, thank the panel for their time and exit calmly.

Audition Analogy: An audition is like a lavish meal that you are preparing for house guests. The audition space is your home and kitchen. Own your space and have confidence in what you are preparing. A key ingredient in this meal is preparation. You must slave over your meal. You want it to be delicious and savory. When your friends arrive (you walk into the room with the panel), welcome them and have confidence in the meal you have made. Gently and hospitably serve your meal and deliver it with poise and grace. When you are done with the meal, thank your guests and softly leave the space.

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PLOT OVERVIEW (WIKIPEDIA)

Act I

Set in “The Present” (1895) in London, the play opens with Algernon Moncrieff, an idle young gentleman, receiving his best friend, John Worthing, whom he knows as Ernest. Ernest has come from the country to propose to Algernon’s cousin, Gwendolen Fairfax. Algernon, however, refuses his consent until Ernest explains why his cigarette case bears the inscription, “From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack.” John-Ernest is forced to admit to living a double life. In the country, he assumes a serious attitude for the benefit of his young ward, the heiress Cecily Cardew, and goes by the name of John (or Jack), while pretending that he must worry about a wastrel younger brother named Ernest in London. In the city, meanwhile, he assumes the identity of the libertine Ernest. Algernon confesses a similar deception: he pretends to have an invalid friend named Bunbury in the country, whom he can “visit” whenever he wishes to avoid an unwelcome social obligation. Jack refuses to tell Algernon the location of his country estate. Gwendolen and her formidable mother Lady Bracknell now call on Algernon. As he distracts Lady Bracknell in another room, Jack proposes to Gwendolen. She accepts, but seems to love him very largely for his professed name of Ernest. Jack accordingly resolves to himself to be rechristened “Ernest”. Discovering them in this intimate exchange, Lady Bracknell interviews Jack as a prospective suitor. Horrified to learn that he was adopted after being discovered as a baby in a handbag at Victoria Station, she refuses him and forbids further contact with her daughter. Gwendolen, though, manages covertly to promise to him her undying love. As Jack gives her his address in the country, Algernon surreptitiously notes it on the cuff of his sleeve: Jack’s revelation of his pretty and wealthy young ward has motivated his friend to meet her.

Act II

Act II moves to Jack’s country house, the Manor House in Woolton, Hertfordshire, where Cecily is found studying with her governess, Miss Prism. Algernon arrives, pretending to be Ernest Worthing, and soon charms Cecily. Long fascinated by Uncle Jack’s hitherto absent black sheep brother, she is predisposed to fall for Algernon in his role of Ernest—whose name she’s particularly fond of. Therefore Algernon, too, plans for the rector, Dr. Chasuble, to rechristen him “Ernest.”

Jack, meanwhile, has decided to abandon his double life. He arrives in full mourning and announces his brother’s death in Paris of a severe chill, a story undermined by Algernon’s presence in the guise of Ernest.

Gwendolen now enters, having run away from home. During the temporary absence of the two men, she meets Cecily, each woman indignantly declaring that she is the one engaged to “Ernest.” When Jack and Algernon reappear, their deceptions are exposed.

Act III

Act III moves into the drawing room. Arriving in pursuit of her daughter, Lady Bracknell is astonished to be told that Algernon and Cecily are engaged. The size of Cecily’s trust fund soon dispels her initial doubts over the young lady’s suitability, but any engagement is forbidden by

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her guardian Jack: he will consent only if Lady Bracknell agrees to his own union with Gwendolen—something she declines to do.

The impasse is broken by the return of Miss Prism, whom Lady Bracknell recognises as the person who, twenty-eight years earlier, as a family nursemaid, had taken a baby boy for a walk in a perambulator (baby carriage) and never returned. Challenged, Miss Prism explains that she had abstractedly put the manuscript of a novel she was writing in the perambulator, and the baby in a handbag, which she had left at Victoria Station. Jack produces the very same handbag, showing that he is the lost baby, the elder son of Lady Bracknell's late sister, and thus indeed Algernon's elder brother. Having acquired such respectable relations, he is acceptable as a suitor for Gwendolen after all.

Gwendolen, though, still insists that she can only love a man named Ernest. What is her fiancé's real first name? Lady Bracknell informs Jack that, as the first-born, he would have been named after his father, General Moncrieff. Jack examines the army lists and discovers that his father's name – and hence his own real name—was in fact Ernest. Pretence was reality all along. As the happy couples embrace—Jack and Gwendolen, Algernon and Cecily, and even Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism—Lady Bracknell complains to her newfound relative: “My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality.” “On the contrary, Aunt Augusta”, he replies, “I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of being Earnest.”

CHARACTER LIST (SPARKNOTES)

John (Jack/Ernest) Worthing, J.P. - The play's protagonist. Jack Worthing is a seemingly responsible and respectable young man who leads a double life. In Hertfordshire, where he has a country estate, Jack is known as Jack. In London he is known as Ernest. As a baby, Jack was discovered in a handbag in the cloakroom of Victoria Station by an old man who adopted him and subsequently made Jack guardian to his granddaughter, Cecily Cardew. Jack is in love with his friend Algernon's cousin, Gwendolen Fairfax. The initials after his name indicate that he is a Justice of the Peace.

Algernon Moncrieff* - The play's secondary hero. Algernon is a charming, idle, decorative bachelor, nephew of Lady Bracknell, cousin of Gwendolen Fairfax, and best friend of Jack Worthing, whom he has known for years as Ernest. Algernon is brilliant, witty, selfish, amoral, and given to making delightful paradoxical and epigrammatic pronouncements. He has invented a fictional friend, “Bunbury,” an invalid whose frequent sudden relapses allow Algernon to wriggle out of unpleasant or dull social obligations.

Gwendolen Fairfax - Algernon's cousin and Lady Bracknell's daughter. Gwendolen is in love with Jack, whom she knows as Ernest. A model and arbiter of high fashion and society, Gwendolen speaks with unassailable authority on matters of taste and morality. She is sophisticated, intellectual, cosmopolitan, and utterly pretentious. Gwendolen is fixated on the name Ernest and says she will not marry a man without that name.

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Cecily Cardew - Jack's ward, the granddaughter of the old gentlemen who found and adopted Jack when Jack was a baby. Cecily is probably the most realistically drawn character in the play. Like Gwendolen, she is obsessed with the name Ernest, but she is even more intrigued by the idea of wickedness. This idea, rather than the virtuous-sounding name, has prompted her to fall in love with Jack's brother Ernest in her imagination and to invent an elaborate romance and courtship between them.

Lady Bracknell - Algernon's snobbish, mercenary, and domineering aunt and Gwendolen's mother. Lady Bracknell married well, and her primary goal in life is to see her daughter do the same. She has a list of "eligible young men" and a prepared interview she gives to potential suitors. Like her nephew, Lady Bracknell is given to making hilarious pronouncements, but where Algernon means to be witty, the humor in Lady Bracknell's speeches is unintentional. Through the figure of Lady Bracknell, Wilde manages to satirize the hypocrisy and stupidity of the British aristocracy. Lady Bracknell values ignorance, which she sees as "a delicate exotic fruit." When she gives a dinner party, she prefers her husband to eat downstairs with the servants. She is cunning, narrow-minded, authoritarian, and possibly the most quotable character in the play.

Miss Prism - Cecily's governess. Miss Prism is an endless source of pedantic bromides and clichés. She highly approves of Jack's presumed respectability and harshly criticizes his "unfortunate" brother. Puritan though she is, Miss Prism's severe pronouncements have a way of going so far over the top that they inspire laughter. Despite her rigidity, Miss Prism seems to have a softer side. She speaks of having once written a novel whose manuscript was "lost" or "abandoned." Also, she entertains romantic feelings for Dr. Chasuble.

Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D. - The rector on Jack's estate. Both Jack and Algernon approach Dr. Chasuble to request that they be christened "Ernest." Dr. Chasuble entertains secret romantic feelings for Miss Prism. The initials after his name stand for "Doctor of Divinity."

Lane - Algernon's manservant. When the play opens, Lane is the only person who knows about Algernon's practice of "Bunburying." Lane appears only in Act **Merriman** - The butler at the Manor House, Jack's estate in the country. Merriman appears only in Acts II and III.

*Note: Algernon's nickname is Algy and is pronounced Algee (like the organism Algae).

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JACK

My dear Algy, I don't know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple.

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ALGERNON

Why does your aunt call you her uncle? 'From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack.' There is no objection, I admit, to an aunt being a small aunt, but why an aunt, no matter what her size may be, should call her own nephew her uncle, I can't quite make out. Besides, your name isn't Jack at all; it is Ernest. You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. Here is one of them. I'll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to any one else.

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LADY BRACKNELL

Well, I must say, Algernon, that I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life. I am always telling that to your poor uncle, but he never seems to take much notice . . . as far as any improvement in his ailment goes. Well, Algernon, of course if you are obliged to be beside the bedside of Mr. Bunbury, I have nothing more to say. But I would be much obliged if you would ask Mr. Bunbury, from me, to be kind enough not to have a relapse on Saturday, for I rely on you to arrange my music for me. It is my last reception, and one wants something that will encourage conversation, particularly at the end of the season when every one has practically said whatever they had to say, which, in most cases, was probably not much.

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GWENDOLYN

You have admired me? Yes, I am quite well aware of the fact. And I often wish that in public, at any rate, you had been more demonstrative. For me you have always had an irresistible fascination. Even before I met you I was far from indifferent to you. We live, as I hope you know, Mr Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits, I am told; and my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.

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CECILY

You silly boy! Why, we have been engaged for the last three months. It will be exactly three months on Thursday. Ever since dear Uncle Jack first confessed to us that he had a younger brother who was very wicked and bad, you of course have formed the chief topic of conversation between myself and Miss Prism. And of course a man who is much talked about is always very attractive. One feels there must be something in him, after all. I daresay it was foolish of me, but I fell in love with you, Ernest. The engagement was actually settled on the 14th of February last. Worn out by your entire ignorance of my existence, I determined to end the matter one way or the other, and after a long struggle with myself I accepted you under this dear old tree here.

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DR. CHASUBLE (Reverend)

Mr. Worthing, I offer you my sincere condolence. Will the interment take place here? In Paris! I fear that hardly points to any very serious state of mind at the last. You would no doubt wish me to make some slight allusion to this tragic domestic affliction next Sunday. My sermon on the meaning of the manna in the wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful, or, as in the present case, distressing. I have preached it at harvest celebrations, christenings, confirmations, on days of humiliation and festal days. The last time I delivered it was in the Cathedral, as a charity sermon on behalf of the Society for the Prevention of Discontent among the Upper Orders. The Bishop, who was present, was much struck by some of the analogies I drew.

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MISS PRISM

Cecily! I am surprised at you. Mr. Worthing has many troubles in his life. Idle merriment and triviality would be out of place in his conversation. You must remember his constant anxiety about that unfortunate young man his brother. I do not think that even I could produce any effect on a character that according to his own brother's admission is irretrievably weak and vacillating. Indeed I am not sure that I would desire to reclaim him. I am not in favour of this modern mania for turning bad people into good people at a moment's notice. As a man sows so let him reap. You must put away your diary, Cecily. I really don't see why you should keep a diary at all. Memory, my dear Cecily, is the diary that we all carry about with us.

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LANE

Algernon. Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

Lane. I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

Algernon. I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—any one can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

Lane. Yes, sir.

Algernon. And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

Lane. Yes, sir. [Hands them on a salver.]

Algernon. [Inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa.] Oh! . . . by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

Lane. Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

Algernon. Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

Lane. I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

Algernon. Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralising as that?

Lane. I believe it is a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

Algernon. [Languidly.] I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

Lane. No, sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

Algernon. Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

Lane. Thank you, sir. [Lane goes out.]

Algernon. Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.

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MERRIMAN

Mr. Ernest Worthing has just driven over from the station. He has brought his luggage with him. He seemed very much disappointed. I mentioned that you and Miss Prism were in the garden. He said he was anxious to speak to you privately for a moment. I have put Mr. Ernest's things in the room next to yours, sir. I suppose that is all right? [JACK does not pay attention to Merriman] Mr. Ernest's luggage, sir. I have unpacked it and put it in the room next to your own. He brought three portmanteaus, a dressing-case, two hat-boxes, and a large luncheon-basket. May I do anything else for you, sir?