Art is one way whereby mankind seeks to understand the world. . . . Our search for meaning . . . is always directed toward discovering those relationships that reveal order within what would otherwise seem to be chance events. Art, then, . . . shapes perceptions about human experience into . . . patterned relationships that help us order our views about mankind and the universe. . . .

The artist . . . works primarily from his or her own perceptions and seeks to involve the audience's emotions, imagination, and intellect directly. A playwright consequently presents events as though they are occurring at that moment before our eyes; we absorb them in the way we absorb life itself—through their direct operation on our senses. Thus, as art differs from life by stripping away irrelevant details and organizing events to compose a connected pattern, so a play illuminates and comments (though sometimes indirectly) on human experience even as it seemingly creates human experience.

But, just as we do not mistake a statue for a real person, we do not mistake stage action for reality. Rather, we usually view a play with what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called a "willing suspension of disbelief." By this concept he meant that, while we know the events of a play are not real, we agree for the moment not to disbelieve their reality. . . .

This state in which we are sufficiently detached to view an artistic event semiobjectively is sometimes called esthetic distance. [However], the distance must not be so great as to induce indifference. Therefore, while a degree of detachment is necessary, [audience] involvement is of equal importance. This feeling of kinship is sometimes called empathy. Thus, we watch a play with a double sense of concern and detachment. It is both a removed and an intensified reaction of a kind seldom possible outside esthetic experience. Another way of putting this is that art (that is, a statue, a musical composition, or a drama) lifts us above the everyday fray and gives us something like a "god's-eye" view of human experience. . . .

Art lays claim . . . to being serious (in the sense of having something important to communicate), but because its methods are so indirect (it presents experience but does not attempt to explain it fully) it is often ambiguous. . . .

Special Attributes of Theatre as an Art. Even within the fine arts theatre holds a special place; it is the art that comes closest to life as it is lived from day to day. Not only is human experience and action its subject, it also uses live human beings (actors) as its primary means of communicating with an audience. Quite often the speech of the performers approximates that heard in real life; the actors may wear costumes that might be seen on the street; and they may perform in settings that recall actual places. Not all theatre attempts to be so realistic and at times it may even approximate other performing arts (such as dance and music), but nevertheless it is the art most capable of recreating mankind's typical experiences.

Such lifelikeness is also one of the reasons theatre is often insufficiently valued: a play, a setting, the acting may so resemble what is familiar to spectators that they fail to recognize how difficult it is to produce this lifelikeness skillfully. To a certain degree all people are actors; they vary the roles they play (almost moment by moment) according to the people they encounter. In doing so, they utilize the same tools as the actor: voice, speech, movement, gesture, psychological motivation, and the like. Consequently, most persons do not fully recognize the problems faced by a skilled actor. Even those within the theatre often differ in their opinions about whether artistic excellence depends primarily on talent and instinct or on training and discipline.
Theatre further resembles life in being ephemeral. As in life, each episode is experienced and then immediately becomes part of the past. When the performance ends, its essence can never be fully recaptured. Unlike a novel, painting, or statute, each of which remains relatively unchanged, a theatrical production when it is ended lives only in the play script, program, pictures, reviews, and memories of those who were present.

Theatre resembles life also in being the most objective of the arts, since characteristically it presents both outer and inner experience through speech and action. As in life, it is through listening and watching that we come to know characters both externally and internally. What we learn about their minds, personalities, and motivations comes from what they say and do and from what others tell us about them. Thus we absorb a theatrical performance the way we do a scene from real life.

Additionally, theatre can be said to resemble life because of the complexity of its means for, like a scene from life itself, it is made up of intermingled sound, movement, place, dress, lighting, and so on. In other words, theatre draws on all the other arts: literature in its script; painting, architecture, and sculpture (and sometimes dance) in its spectacle; and speech and music in its audible aspects. In some ways, then, theatre encompasses all the other arts. Furthermore, theatre is psychologically the most immediate of the arts.

Several contemporary critics have argued that the essence of theatre—what distinguishes it from other dramatic media such as television and film—lies in the simultaneous presence of live actors and spectators in the same room, and that everything else is expendable. . . . Live performance has important attributes that television and film cannot duplicate, most significantly . . . the three-dimensionality of the theatrical experience and the special relationship between performers and spectators: in the theatre, . . . since the full acting area remains visible, the audience may choose what it will watch, even though the director may attempt to focus attention on some specific aspect of a scene. [But, and] perhaps most important, during a live performance there is continuous interaction between performer and spectator; even as the actor is eliciting responses from the audience, those responses in turn are affecting the actor's performance. Thus, a live performance permits the audience a far more active role than television and film do. Ultimately, there is a fundamental difference in the psychological responses aroused by electronic media and theatre because the former presents pictures of events whereas the latter performs the actual events in what amounts to the same space as that occupied by the audience. This difference results in one unique characteristic of theatre: its ability to offer intense sensory experience through the simultaneous presence of live actors and audience. . . .

The Audience. Until the public sees the material performed we usually do not call it theatre. For all the arts a public is imperative, but for most this public may be thought of as individuals—the reader of a novel or poem, the viewer of a painting or a piece of sculpture—each of whom may experience the work in isolation. But a theatre audience is assembled as a group at a given time and place to experience a performance.

Why Does an Audience Attend the Theatre? One of the most powerful motives for going to the theatre is the desire for entertainment, which implies suspension of personal cares, relaxation of tensions, and a feeling of well-being, satisfaction, and renewal. But although everyone may believe that the theatre should provide entertainment, not all agree on what is entertaining. Many would exclude any treatment of controversial subject matter on the grounds that an audience goes to the theatre to escape from cares rather than to be confronted with problems. . . .
Other persons look to theatre for stimulation. They too desire to be entertained, but argue that the theatre should also provide new insights and provocative perceptions about significant topics, advocate action about political and social issues, or increase awareness of and sensitivity to others and surroundings. Both points of view are valid in part, but adherents of neither point of view should attempt to limit unduly the theatre's offerings. The whole range of drama should be available to audiences, for the health of the theatre depends upon breadth of appeal.

In America today the success of a play is frequently judged by its ability to attract large audiences over a considerable period of time. But is a play to be considered a failure if it does not achieve financial success? Not necessarily. A dramatist has a right to select his or her audience just as much as an audience has to select a play. Actually, dramatists do so when they choose the subject matter, characters, and techniques to be used, for, consciously or unconsciously, they have an ideal spectator in mind. Although playwrights may hope for universal acceptance, each desires the favorable response of a particular group. Consequently, a play may be deemed successful if it achieves the desired response from the audience for which it was primarily intended.

The Problem of Value. It is difficult to defend art on the basis of its immediate utility. Art ultimately must be valued because of its capacity to improve the quality of life: by increasing our sensitivity to others and our surroundings, by sharpening our perceptions, by reshaping our values so that moral and societal concerns take precedence over material well-being. Of all the arts, theatre has perhaps the greatest potential as a humanizing force, for at its best it asks us to enter imaginatively into the lives of others so we may understand their aspirations and motivations. Through role-playing (either in daily life or in the theatre) we come to understand who and what we are and to see ourselves in relation to others. Perhaps most important, in a world given increasingly to violence, the value of being able to understand and feel for others as human beings cannot be overestimated, because violence flourishes most fully when we so dehumanize others that we no longer think of their hopes, aims, and sufferings but treat them as objects to be manipulated or on whom to vent our frustrations. To know (emotionally, imaginatively, and intellectually) what it means to be human in the broadest sense ought to be one of the primary goals of both education and life; for reaching that goal no approach has greater potential than theatre, since humans are its subject and living beings its primary medium. Unfortunately, quality—unlike quantity—is not measurable except subjectively. And subjectivity takes us into the realm of taste, judgment, and a host of variables about which agreement is seldom possible. There are many levels of taste, many degrees of complexity, and a wide range of quality. But, if we cannot expect ever to achieve complete agreement, we all can sharpen our own perceptions of the theatre and its processes. To do this, we need first to understand the theatre and how it works. Second, we need to develop some approach through which we can judge the relative merits of what is performed and how it is performed. Then, we should work to encourage those theatrical values that seem important to us. In this way we may acquire understanding and judgment—that is, we become critics of the theatre.
Understanding/appreciating the Technical Elements

A performance does not just happen; it is the product of a great deal of teamwork. The technical elements of a production support the characters the actors create to present the audience with the illusionary reality that is theatre. Sets, lights, sound, props, and costumes create the environment in which the play lives. These elements combine with the audience’s imagination to fashion a theatrical reality that is different from our day-to-day lives yet recognizable by all involved. The following discussion questions are intended to help students focus on each of these technical elements and analyze its part in a production.

Section A: Scenery
Before the performance began, what were your first impressions of the set design? How did it make you feel? Which of your senses were involved by the set design?

What was the physicality of the stage? Did the set incorporate any theatrical devices such as a rake, a thrust, ramps or stairs onstage, or the voms or pit in the audience? What type of action did you expect?

As the performance progressed, did the set change from scene to scene or did it remain the same for the entire play? Were the changes of location made by actual set alterations or by the actors’ use of the set?

How was the stage used? Did the action take place across the whole stage or was action contained in small areas? What could you tell about each environment and the time period of the used area? Was movement between areas fluid or rigid? Did the actors move around the set in purposeful motion or did action flow from one area to another?

What materials and color schemes were used for walls, the deck (stage floor), set pieces? Did the materials and colors fit the time and location of the play? Did the colors suggest a mood or atmosphere to you?

Were you able to concentrate on the action and characters or did the elements of the set attract your attention?

After viewing the performance, do you feel the set design supported the play? Did it make sense to you? Would you have done anything differently? What and why?

Section B: Costumes
What could you tell about each of the characters based on his or her appearance before any action took place? Did the costumes influence your expectations or opinion of each character?

Did the costumes put you in the appropriate time period and geographical setting (if any)? Did the style of the costumes match or enhance the characters’ personalities and social situations and the mood of the play?

How did the colors and materials used compliment or contrast with the colors and materials of the set? Did the colors and materials group the characters in any way?

Were there any parts of the costumes you found distracting or out of place?

Section C: Lighting
What clues did the lighting give you about the mood or emotional tone of the play?

Was the lighting from an identifiable source or did it blend into the setting? Was the lighting supportive of the action or distracting? Was it ever supposed to be distracting?

Could you identify the colors that were used? Why do you think these particular shades were chosen? Did any one character have a particular shade or degree of lighting?
Sometimes lighting is used together with suggestive scenery or certain pieces of furniture to imply that a certain area onstage is always perceived as a specific place. Did you see this in this performance’s design?

Section D: Sound
What types of sounds were used? Were the sounds environmental noise or in response to specific character actions (for example: crickets chirping in the summer or a gunshot)?
Was sound or music used to create or enhance the atmosphere, or to foreshadow events?
Were certain sounds or musical motifs associated with certain characters or repeated situations?
Did the sounds fit the situation or distract you from the performance?
Were the sounds correct for time period and location, or did they comment on the time and place?

Section E: Props
Were the props appropriate to the time period and setting? Were they in keeping with the rest of the setting (including color choices in setting and costumes)? Did some or all of them comment on the setting as a whole?
Did the characters have all the props they needed for the scenes? Did they have too many props?
Did they have fewer props than you expected?
What did you learn about the characters’ situation or background from their possessions? Remember that props include furniture, books, purses, wagons, plates and silverware—anything an actor touches.

Section F: General
What non-actor aspect of the performance impacted you the most? Was this aspect more textual or physical?
Did the technical elements of the performance enhance or detract from your enjoyment of the play?
Would you have changed anything about this production? How would you have changed it? Why?
Understanding/appreciating the Play in Performance
Suggested by: Katherine Ommanney’s *The Stage and the School*

The following questions may help you to view shows intelligently, but don’t let them spoil your enjoyment of the theatre or turn you into a commentator during the performance! Real enthusiasts of the theatre free their imaginations and emotions while seeing a play or a picture, while using their intelligence and discrimination to heighten their appreciation of this great art.

Section A: Theme
In your opinion, is the fundamental idea of the play true or false in its concept of life? Is the theme consistent with the setting, plot and characters presented in the play? Do you agree with the author’s philosophy? In your opinion, should the general public be encouraged to see the play?

Section B: Plot
Is there a clear-cut sequence of events?
Do they rise to a gripping climax?
Were you held in suspense until the end or did you realize what the ending would be beforehand?
Were you as emotionally stirred as the author apparently wanted you to be?
Are you satisfied as to the final outcome?
Are you chiefly interested in the events, the people, or the place?

Section C: Characterization
Are the characters true to life?
Are they consistent throughout the action of the entire play?
Are the characters in keeping with the social and geographical background of the play?
Do they arouse such feelings as sympathy, affection, disgust, admiration, or hatred on the part of the audience?
Are their actions in keeping with their motives?
Are the situations at the climax and conclusion the result of their inherent natures?

Section D: Style
Did the dialogue retain your interest throughout the play?
Is it consistent with the characters and the setting?
Is it an end in itself or an adequate means of plot advancement and characterization?
Did it make you think about the author or the characters themselves?
Did or do you remember lines after having seen the play because of their appropriateness or beauty?
If a dialect or dialects are used were they correct? Did the actors use them consistently?
Would people of the class represented talk in real life as they do in the play?
Is the power of expression worthy of the ideas expressed?

Section E: Acting
Were the actors’ interpretations of their roles correct from the standpoint of the play itself?
Did each actor make his or her role a living individual?
Were the actors artificial or natural in their technique?
Were you conscious of the ways they sought to create effects?
Did they grip you emotionally—did you weep, laugh, suffer, and exult with them?
Were their voices pleasing and their presence magnetic?
Did they remain in character every moment?
Did or do you think of them as the characters they were depicting or as themselves?
Did the actors use the play as a means of self-glorification, or were each of them an intrinsic part of the action at all times?
Did each cooperate with the other actors, the director, and the author in interpreting the play: by knowing his or her lines, helping to focus attention on the center of interest, and by losing himself or herself in the part?

Section F: Audience Reaction
Was the audience attentive or restless during the performance? Was there a definite response—gasp, laughter, applause?
Did the audience express any immediate appreciation of clever lines, dramatic situations, and skillful acting? Was the audience apathetic or animated, bored or buoyant, serious or scoffing? Was the applause spontaneous and whole-hearted, or politely perfunctory? Did it seem to you that some audience members enjoyed the play more than others? Do you think this was because of their own personal background, or some other reason?