

Tips from the Top: How to Nail an Audition!

It's a perennial question for actors: how do I prepare for an audition?

We asked leading casting directors from Australia and the United States to give us their 10 top tips to help you understand the process and maximise your chances of success.

In this article you will find advice from Mullinars, Tom McSweeney, Anousha Zarkesh, Bonnie Gillepsie, Matt Skrobalak and Kim Morarefi.

Mullinars:

With offices in Sydney and Melbourne, Mullinars have cast more than 4,000 television commercials, 45 Australian series and more than 70 feature films. These tips were compiled by the Mullinars team, including casting director and CEO Ann Robinson; casting directors Allison Meadows, Jane Norris, Nathan Lloyd and Veronica Taylor; and casting associates Alexis Johns, Danielle Tigas, Emma Dockery and Hannah Charlton.

1. Be prepared. Regardless of how it works in the US, Australian directors and producers expect actors to learn their lines for an audition. Not having to worry about your lines gives you the opportunity to be flexible and open to direction. Before you walk into the room, ask yourself the important questions about the character, such as, "Who am I and what do I want?"
2. Present yourself in the best possible light. Arrive with enough time to feel confident and as relaxed as possible. Dress to suggest an understanding of the character but not in a 'costume'. For example, if you are testing for the role of a barrister and you come dressed in boardshorts and thongs, it could make it harder for the decision-makers to see you in the role. On the other hand, you don't need to come in wig and gown – that's going too far. In this instance, smart professional clothes would be perfect.
3. Stay flexible. In the audition room, be ready to let go of everything you have rehearsed and try something new. Often, we'll ask you to vary the scene simply to ensure you are a flexible actor, not because your initial interpretation was wrong.
4. Brush up on your accents. If you've been asked to screentest using an accent, practise beforehand. You want to be able to concentrate on your performance and stay in character, rather than spending the whole test listening to yourself.
5. Be genuine. Directors are deciding if they want to work with you, just as much as they are deciding if you are right for a role. Let them see the real you.

6. Do your research. Find out all you can about the storyline, your character, the period, the style of the work, the director and so on. If it's an existing series, watch some episodes so you can judge where to pitch your audition. If there are no details available, don't be afraid to ask questions in the room if you feel it will help your audition. If there is a full script to read, come in and read it.
7. Listen, listen, listen – and keep going. If the director or casting director gives you notes, listen carefully and be sure to use them in your next take. If there is a reader in the room, respond and engage with them; they are there to support you. If you encounter a less-than-ideal reader, do your best, and remember that everyone is testing with that reader; it's a level playing field. Don't stop mid-audition because you forgot your lines or you're not feeling 'it' – keep ploughing through. Nine times out of 10, the stumble is worth it if you get to the end, as there might have been some really terrific moments before you lost it. We can edit screentests to ensure only your best work is presented.
8. Submit a self-test. If you can't make it to the casting session and you have been invited to submit a self-test, keep it clear and simple. Lighting should be gentle but not atmospheric (fluoro is often too severe, while candlelight is not sufficient); audio quality must be clear, without too many other sounds; your backdrop should be neutral so as not to distract from your test. Place yourself closer to the microphone than your reader. If the reader is operating the camera, try and lock off the frame in a medium close-up and then move the reader further back so their voice won't dominate. The advice to 'keep going' does not apply to self-tests. We don't want to see more than two takes of a scene or any stuff-ups.
9. Keep your online profile up to date. Your Showcast, Casting Networks or similar profile should always be accurate, ideally with a showreel link (yes, we do watch them, and yes, we do send them to producers and directors when we're recommending you for a role).
10. Enjoy every audition. Remember, if you have been asked to screentest, we believe you are potentially right for the role and want you to do well. A good screentest is never wasted, as good work is always remembered by the decision-makers.

Tom McSweeney:

As one of Australia's most reputable casting directors, Tom has worked on more than 200 feature-film, miniseries and telemovie projects, as well as 500-plus hours of episodic television production for the US, UK, Canadian and Australian markets.

1. Be excited at having the opportunity to do the thing that makes you happy – act!

2. Remember that by being selected for an audition, you have already won, so there's nothing to lose.
3. Don't forget to breathe.
4. Show up 10 minutes early and get focused.
5. Own the material: break down the entire scene and identify the writer's intent.
6. Listen to the reader; don't just hear your cue line.
7. Don't bring props.
8. If wanting to sit or stand, ask if it would work for the casting director if you did so.
9. Know where the camera is and make sure it can always see you clearly.
10. At the end of the audition, thank them for their time, wish them good luck with the project and then leave immediately.

Anousha Zarkesh:

Anousha has been working as a casting director on films, TV shows and commercials for more than 20 years. Among the features she has cast are Tomorrow When the War Began, Beautiful Kate, The Reef, Unfinished Sky, Accidents Happen, Suburban Mayhem, The Children of the Silk Road and Hey Hey It's Esther Blueburger. Her eclectic TV credits include Rake Series 1, 2 and 3, Redfern Now Series 1 and 2, Mabo, Wild Boys, Mary Bryant, First Australians and Never Tear Us Apart (INXS telemovie).

1. Believe in yourself and trust that the casting director has brought you in because they like your work. Be confident that the CD wants you to succeed.
2. Do your homework. Who are the director, producer and writer, and what have they done before? Look at style of work, type of performance, tone of performance. Read the script if it's available and learn your lines well, so you are prepared to take direction in the studio.
3. Dress for the role; this is expected of you.
4. Be imaginative and make bold choices in your audition. You can always tone it down in later tests, but don't be bland. Don't play it safe.
5. Get proactive – send self-tests if you feel you are right for a role. CDs can't test everyone, but we do watch all self-tests to find little gems we may have missed.

6. Be flexible. If you've made choices about the character, be prepared to radically change your performance on the spot and show you can take direction readily.
7. Don't sweat on your mistakes; it's not the end of the world. Trust that the CD is on your side.
8. Take your time to 'own' the room. You only have 10 to 20 minutes to make your mark, but if you are prepared, you can be confident in your performance and know you made the most of it.
9. Remember, if you don't get the role, it may not be because of your performance. Other factors could be at play, such as colour of hair, height and type of look.
10. If your performance was good, CDs will remember you and bring you back for future auditions.

Bonnie Gillespie:

*As a producer and casting director in Los Angeles, Bonnie specialises in indie darlings. Her weekly column, *The Actors Voice*, is available at *Actors Access*. Her most popular book is *Self-Management for Actors*, on which her teaching is based. Visit BonnieGillespie.com*

1. Book the room, not the job. Sure, you want work (duh), but if you build fans out of the buyers, you've done something far more valuable long term.
2. Focus on your bullseye. Yes, you're an actor. You have range. You can hit anything on the dartboard. But this industry rewards specialists. Become very clear on the niche you master – that's your bullseye – and research the buyers who actively populate projects of that niche. Your intersection with those folk will be more meaningful because you solve a creative problem they commonly have.
3. Get your tools in order. There is no excuse for having an unprofessional resumé, candid headshots, a sloppy website or a slapdash demo reel. As a creative entrepreneur, you are running a small business, and it is your responsibility to get your materials up to their on-brand best, so the buyers are not distracted from your talent.
4. Get down with the pursuit. You're going to be pursuing work a lot more than actually doing it, so fall in love with the hustle, the researching, the building of your craft. If you hate the game, you can't possibly win at it.
5. Pursue the work, not the people. Yes, this is a relationship business and you'll need a community of storytellers to help you reach your goals. But there is so much work you can get before you have an

agent, before the top casting offices are inviting you in ... and you need to build to the point where those folk are excited to meet you.

6. Eliminate poison playmates from your life. There are some well-meaning folk (we're usually related to them) who do not help us realise our dreams. They focus on the negative, telling us how it can't be done and complaining about what's not working. This negativity permeates everything and leads to actor bitterness – a wholly uncastable quality.
7. Discover your confidence. It's there. There is only one you and you are not trying to beat any other actor for a role. It's either yours or it isn't. Don't engage in waiting-room games. Pop in your ear-buds and focus on your prep work.
8. Make strong choices about the material you've been given. Don't rewrite the script. If you're told you may improvise, do so, but realise that the words on the page have been put there by someone who has already been hired. You have not yet been hired, so respect those words. Show what you can do to bring the existing text to life within the parameters the casting director has given you.
9. Don't worry about what everyone else is doing; that's their road, not yours. There are no industry rules; there is no one recipe for success. This is a creative journey filled with mystery and fun. When choosing training, marketing tactics or even use of social networking to cement your brand, check your gut for what's best for you.
10. Have fun, don't suck. We only want you to be awesome, so please come in and have a blast, be great and then let it all go. You'll have so many auditions over the course of your life. Learn how to love 'em, and move on!

Matt Skrobalak:

As vice president of talent and casting at CBS Television Studios, Matt currently oversees casting on numerous TV series and pilots, including CSI, The Good Wife, Hawaii 5-0, Blue Bloods, Under the Dome and Reign. He has been coming to Australia and New Zealand to scout for talent since 2005.

1. Take stock of your goals and be honest with yourself. Review your professional progress as objectively as possible but also realise it takes time to develop a consistent and satisfying career.
2. Don't be in a rush to get over here [LA]. Timing is everything and you want to be sure you are at a point in your life and career that it makes sense for you to be here. You can pursue work opportunities via self-taping until the time is right.
3. Try before you buy. Before any move, come visit LA and see what it's like – if it's somewhere you could see yourself living. Part and parcel of

that is making sure you have the savings to support yourself. Your focus should be on acting, not your bank balance.

4. Train and maintain a flawless American accent. Most roles you will be auditioning for are going to be American, so if that accent isn't in great shape, you will not get any traction.
5. Make sure you have the support of your Aussie representative – you need them to agree and be on board with your decision, to enhance your chances of success. They will be a big part of helping you secure LA representation before moving here permanently or even semi-permanently. It's an absolute necessity to have an LA-based representative if you want to work here.
6. Meet with an immigration attorney. Understand the options and costs of securing work papers.
7. Watch American-produced content. It's crucial to interpreting tone and audition material, and has the side benefit of exposing you to the American accent.
8. Research the business. There are numerous online sites you can read to keep up with who the major players, studios, directors, producers and writers are. Know them!
9. Make yourself available for opportunity. Many international actors spend too much time with others from the same part of the world when they get to LA. While you can find support, comfort and commonality with people who share a similar experience, you also isolate yourself from making new connections.
10. Never stop learning and growing. While you wait for opportunities, stay active and engaged. Get into a class, self-produce, write -... don't fall into the trap of sitting around and talking about acting. Do something!

Kim Moarefi:

As a casting/production consultant with Cypress Films and Finance Administrator for New York Theatre Workshop, Kim's casting work includes Bernard and Doris and Grey Gardens for HBO Films; radio plays for BBC and WNYC; New York theatre (Artios Award-winning The Exonerated); regional theatre (Palm Beach Dramaworks and Everyman Theatre Baltimore); associate producer, film (Milwaukee, Minnesota, Bed of Roses, Side Streets, Julian Po, Cherry). Kim has been nominated twice for Artios awards.

1. Relax! Try and practise a bit of meditation before you work. Remember, your whole body is your instrument, so stay connected both physically and emotionally.

2. Keep your focus. When you're called, take a breath to centre yourself before you walk in the door. You need to keep your focus and appear calm, cool and well-prepared.
3. Dress to suggest the role, to help you get in the proper frame of mind. For example, if auditioning for a police officer, don't wear flip-flops, even if it is hot. If you are auditioning for a corporate lawyer, wear something slightly business (maybe just a blazer). This goes for theatre, film and television. It will help you get into the role and also make you seem well prepared but not over-the-top crazy and literal.
4. Learn to read the audition room. This starts from the vibe you get while waiting. Is the monitor/casting director who is bringing people in and out tense? When you walk in, introduce yourself but don't shake hands with the creative team unless they put out their hands first. I have found proffering a hand can make certain folk uncomfortable.
5. Try not to ask too many questions. If you must ask something, be direct and to the point. Too many questions can be a red flag for 'needy' – generally a big turnoff for directors and producers. We are looking for actors with imagination and intelligence, who are as autonomous as possible.
6. Prepare the material as well as you can – even with a cold read, you need to be able to make full choices on the spot – then as soon as you walk in the room, throw it all away. If you have made strong, honest choices, even if they are not what the director wants in the scene, you will stay in the moment. If you start off feeling uncentred, ask to start over.
7. Listen and respond to the reader. If they suck and do not give you anything, use your imagination and create the person you need them to be for the scene to work. If it's a big audition, try not to over-invest. Bookend it with meeting a friend (hopefully, an accountant or a stockbroker, not someone in the business with whom you can obsess over the audition). Release the audition as soon as you walk out the door.
8. For on-camera work, keep your eyeline simple and clean. In a legit on-camera audition, never look at the camera unless you are told to. In a theatrical audition, if you are doing a monologue, never use the folk you are auditioning for as your point of focus. Look slightly up and left or right of them.
9. Take your space with confidence and pride. This is your time and we want to be able to cast you and stop having to hold auditions. It may be the only time you get to act for a while, so enjoy it.

- 10.** Bring a sense of play to the audition, no matter what type of material. People like hiring actors with a sense of humour, however it manifests itself.

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