The setting of Oedipus the King as in the case of most Greek tragedies does not require a change of scene. Throughout the play the skene with at least one door represents the facade of the royal palace of Thebes. Even when action takes place inside the palace, such as Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus's self-blinding, there is no shift of scene. These interior actions are described in a speech delivered by a messenger rather than enacted before the audience (1237-1286). The messenger speech eliminates the need for scene changes, which, due to the limited resources of the ancient theater, would have been difficult and awkward. Sophocles, like Aeschylus and Euripides, made a virtue of the necessity of this convention of the ancient theater by writing elaborate messenger speeches, which provide a vivid word picture of the offstage action.

Prologue (1-150) - Oedipus, Priest and Creon

1. What is the dramatic purpose of the prologue?
2. How does Oedipus characterize himself (7-8)?
3. What is his attitude toward the suppliants (13-14)?
4. What conditions in Thebes does the Priest describe (25-30)?
5. How do the suppliants view Oedipus (31-34; 40-46)?
6. The Priest refers to Oedipus's saving of Thebes from the Sphinx (35-38), a monster with human female head and breasts and a lion's body with wings. The "tax" (36) which the Thebans paid the Sphinx was in the form of young men killed by the monster when they were unable to answer the riddle: "What has one voice and four feet, two feet and three feet?" The answer, which only Oedipus was able to provide, was "man" (crawling on all fours as a baby, walking unaided on two feet throughout most of his life and finally walking with the aid of a cane in old age). What request does the Priest make of Oedipus (41-42; 51)?
7. Remember that the Athenian audience came into the theater already knowing the story of Oedipus and his horrible fate. Explain the irony of 60-61.
8. What step has Oedipus already taken to deal with the problem (68-73)?
9. According to Creon what did Apollo say must be done in order to cure Thebes of its pollution (95-107)?
10. According to Creon what were the circumstances of Laius's death (114-123)?
11. What motive does Oedipus assign to the killer of Laius (124-125)?
12. What is Oedipus resolved to do (135-137)?
13. Explain the irony of 137-141.

1The numbers refer to line numbers [in brackets] in Oedipus the King.
2Although we associate riddles with children, these enigmatic questions were taken very seriously by primitive cultures and are often prominent in myths, which have their origin in a prehistoric era. Accordingly, riddle solvers were highly respected for their intelligence. Dramatic irony is a much-used literary device in this play.

Parados (151-215)
1. What is the reaction of the Chorus to the advice of Apollo ('the Delian Healer') to Thebes (154-157)?
2. What conditions in Thebes does the Chorus describe (170-182)?

The Chorus then asks Zeus to defend Thebes from Ares, who is usually the war god, but here is a god of destruction in general (190-202), and finally calls upon Apollo ('Lycean King'), Artemis and Bacchus (Dionysus), who was born in Thebes, for help (204-215).

First Episode (216-462) - Oedipus, Chorus and Teiresias

1. Explain the following ironies in Oedipus's speech (218-220; 236-248; 249-251; 259-265).
2. Why does Oedipus summon Teiresias (278-287)?
3. What is Teiresias's reaction to Oedipus's request for help (316-344)?
4. How does Oedipus view Teiresias's behavior (345-349)?
5. What does Teiresias reveal to Oedipus as a result of the king's angry accusation (353; 362)?
6. Note the emphasis on sight and blindness in the dialogue between Oedipus and Teiresias (e.g., 367;371). What irony is implicit in this emphasis?
7. What suspicion does Oedipus begin to harbor about Creon (385-389)?
8. What superiority does Oedipus claim over Teiresias (390-398)?
9. Note the frequent equation of physical sight with knowledge throughout this scene and the rest of the play. What is the irony of this equation?
10. Teiresias then tells Oedipus the horrible truth about himself (413-425). What does Teiresias predict will happen to Oedipus (417-423; 452-460)?

First Stasimon (463-512)

1. What is the Chorus's view of Teiresias's accusations against Oedipus (483-495; 504-511)?

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3 Creon had gone to obtain this information from Apollo's oracle at Delphi (also referred to as Pytho; Apollo himself is sometimes called Phoebus and Loxias), where the god's prophecies and advice were given to applicants by his priestess, the Pythia.
4 A pollution is a religious uncleanness, which is usually the result of murder or of other serious crimes (intentional or unintentional) and infects anyone and anything, which comes into contact with it. Because of the presence of Oedipus, a man polluted by the two terrible crimes of patricide and incest, Thebes is subject to a plague and other disasters.

Second Episode (513-862) - Creon, Chorus, Oedipus and Jocasta
1. What motivates Creon's entrance at the beginning of this episode (513-522)?
2. Why does Oedipus accuse Creon of conspiracy (555-556; 572-573)?
3. How does Creon defend himself against Oedipus's accusation (583-604)?
4. What does Oedipus threaten to do (618-630)?
5. What does Jocasta attempt to do (634-668)? Is she successful (669-697)?

Oedipus, Creon and Jocasta sing lines 649-697 in conjunction with the Chorus. That the characters break into song at this point is an indication of their heightened emotions.

6. How does Jocasta try to assure Oedipus that he not guilty of Laius's death 707-722)?
7. What is Jocasta's view of prophecy (723-725)?
8. Why is Oedipus frightened by the information given by Jocasta (726-745)?
9. What happened to the one surviving witness to the killing of Laius (758-764)?
10. Whom does Oedipus believe are his parents and where does he think he was born (774-775)?
11. Why did Oedipus go to the Delphic Oracle and what was he told there (779-793)?
12. Where did Oedipus arrive as a result of this information (798-799)?
13. What happened at this place (801-813)?
14. What does Oedipus fear (813-822)?
15. Does Oedipus suspect at this point that Laius is his father and Jocasta, his mother (822-827)? Explain your answer.
16. What detail in Jocasta's story of Laius's death does Oedipus take comfort in (842-847)? How does Jocasta try to reassure Oedipus (848-858)? What request does Oedipus make (859-860)?

Second Stasimon (863-910)

1. What wish does the Chorus express in the first stanza (863-872)?

In the beginning of the second stanza the Chorus says that hybris 'arrogant disregard for the rights of others' produces the tyrant, without a doubt referring to Oedipus, since in Greek the title of the play is Oedipus Tyrannos and also on account of the mention of the "foot"5 (878). The Greek word tyrannos is most often used in Tragedy as a synonym for "king" and therefore usually has no pejorative meaning, but its use in this stasimon in connection with hybris suggests its other more sinister meaning in Greek, corresponding to what we mean by our word "tyrant".

2. In your opinion is Oedipus a tyrannical ruler? Is he guilty of hybris?

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5 One etymology of the name Oedipus presented in the play is "swollen foot" referring to the piercing of his feet as an infant (1032-1034).
3. If your answer to these two questions is "yes", is he therefore responsible for his own fate?
4. In what way specifically can the words of the Chorus in the second and third stanzas (873-896) apply to Oedipus?
5. What concern does the Chorus express in the fourth stanza ("the earth's navel" = the Delphic Oracle) (897-910)?

Third Episode (911-1085) - Jocasta, Messenger, Oedipus and Chorus

1. Jocasta appears at the beginning of this scene alone on stage. What prayer does she make and to whom (911-923)?
2. After her prayer a Messenger arrive. What news does he deliver to Oedipus (924-963)?
3. What is Oedipus's reaction to this news (964-972)?
4. What is Jocasta's reaction (977-983)?
5. What further information does the Messenger give to Oedipus (1008-1046)?
6. Whom does the Chorus identify as the herdsman mentioned by the Messenger (1051-1053)?
7. Why does Jocasta ask Oedipus not to seek out the herdsman and then leave (1056-1075)?
8. How does Oedipus interpret Jocasta's emotional behavior (1076-1079)?
10. Explain the irony of the arrival of the Messenger occurring just after Jocasta's prayer. Is the Messenger's news really the good news he thinks it is?

Third Stasimon (1086-1109)

1. In the first stanza the Chorus addresses the mountain Cithaeron on which Oedipus was exposed as a baby. In the second stanza the Chorus addresses Oedipus and speculates about the identity of his parents. Whom do they suggest as possible parents (1098-1101)?

Fourth Episode (1110-1185) - Oedipus, Chorus, Messenger and Herdsman

1. By whom had the Herdsman been employed (1117-1118)? Why is the Herdsman reluctant to answer the questions of Oedipus and the Messenger? What revelation does the Herdsman make (1128-1181)?

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6In connection with this stanza, it should be noted that the Delphic Oracle was not universally popular at Athens when this play was presented because Apollo was supporting the Spartans in the Peloponnesian War (Thucydides, 1.118). Religiously conservative Athenians like Sophocles and Socrates, however, did not waver in their faith in the god.
Fourth Stasimon (1186-1222)

1. What general comment on human life does the Chorus make based on the example of Oedipus (1186-1196)?
2. Summarize briefly the account of Oedipus's life given by the Chorus in the next two stanzas (1197-1212).
3. What horrible fact with regard to Oedipus's marriage does the Chorus point out (1214-1215)?

Exodos (1223 to end) - Second Messenger, Chorus, Oedipus and Creon

1. What news does the Second Messenger announce (1235-1279)?
2. What is the symbolic significance of Oedipus's self-blinding (cf. the Teiresias scene and 1484)?
3. What does Oedipus intend to do (1290-1291)? Why?

The next section of the exodos is a kommos in which Oedipus joins in song with the Chorus, lamenting his fate (1297-1366).

4. Whom does Oedipus blame for his sorrows (1329-1331)?
5. What reasons does Oedipus give for his self-blinding (1369-1385)?
6. How does Oedipus feel about Creon at this point (1419-1421)?
7. What requests does Oedipus make of Creon (1436-1437; 1446-1467)?
8. What future does Oedipus foresee for his two daughters (1489-1502)?
9. What important truth about his life does Creon point out to Oedipus (1522-1523)?
10. What general lesson does the Chorus draw from the example of Oedipus's life (1524-1530)?

Source:
<http://depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/classics/dunkle/studyguide/oedipus.htm>

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Oedipus Rex
Essay Questions

1. Freud was fascinated with the story of Oedipus because he believed it pointed to unconscious forces that motivate all people. This fascination actually lead Freud to create his theory of the Oedipal Complex. Using the resources from our class wiki, explain the Oedipal complex and explain what aspects of the complex connect to the play.

2. Aristotle’s definition of tragedy is very specific. Using resources from our class wiki, assess how well Oedipus Rex fits Aristotle’s definition of tragedy. Ultimately, does this play qualify as a tragedy? – why or why not?

3. Dramatic irony occurs when the meaning of a situation is understood by the audience but not by the character. Discuss Sophocles’ use of dramatic irony in Oedipus Rex. Be sure to cite specific textual examples and analyze them completely.

4. Analyze the character of Oedipus through the lens of the monomyth.