



Playwriting Tips

Getting Started

Borrow from life.

The best plot lines come from someone's personal experience. Use the events in your life to build a believable and entertaining story. Start with reality and use your imagination.

Ask questions.

Where does the story begin? Who is in the first scene? What do they want to do? Why are they there? When is the story taking place? Answer these questions and you'll get the shape of your first scene. Remember, there are no wrong answers.

Don't tell; show!

As much as you can, show the audience your story. Let's say you have a character, Herman, who is a spoiled brat. It's boring to just say he's spoiled. It's more fun to show an example of his character. Let's say Herman's in a toy store. He sees a toy that he really wants, and whines to his mom until she buys it. Then he rips open the package, plays with the toy for a minute, then tosses it aside. What are other ways to show that Herman is spoiled?

Sometimes, writers hit a block.

The best way to overcome it is to keep writing. Write about why you can't think of any more ideas. Write about how you feel about your story. Write until you get excited about your story again.

Rewrite.

Stories get better the more times you tell them. In some ways, writing is like drawing. In art, you sketch an outline, then you colour in between the lines. In writing, start with an outline of your story and fill in the details.

Have fun.

Writing is about ideas. Create stories that mean something to you and that are entertaining to you. If you enjoy writing the story, then chances are likely that others will enjoy reading the story.

Where do I begin?

Start with the setting.

- Where does your story take place? This is only a ten minute play. Therefore, it is probably a good idea to set it in only one specific location either inside or outside. Make it a place you know well and can picture in your mind.

Decide who the two main characters will be.

- Who is the protagonist and who is the antagonist? (Read over the *Playwriting Tips* if you don't know these two terms)

Plays are about conflict.

- What is the main problem the two main characters have with each other?

Start in the middle.

- Start the opening scene in the middle of an argument between the protagonist and the antagonist.
- Write five lines of dialogue for each character.

Read the lines aloud.

- Do they sound like how people really speak? If not, change some of the words.

Write five more lines.

- You are on your way. Each typed page of dialogue equals about one minute of stage time. Therefore, your whole play will have about ten pages of dialogue.

Your play is growing.

- As you continue to write, work to build the rising action – the important events which build up the conflict to the climax.
- Decide what the climax of the play will be. The decisive moment that is the turning point in the plot. It is the most dramatic point in the play.
- Finish the play with the falling action or denouement. Write another page or two which will untangle the complications and wrap up the story.

Get your play up on its feet.

- After you have written several pages, get some friends or family to read them aloud. Listen to how they sound and then rewrite as necessary.
- Don't be afraid to rewrite and rewrite! Writers always go through a long writing process as their plays come to life.
- When you have completed the first draft of your play, have it read aloud again and time it. Remember, you need to stay within the ten minute time limit.
- Continue to rewrite and rework your ideas until you are ready to submit the play to the contest.

How do I make my ideas grow?

Here are some ways to make your ideas grow into a play.

Create Conflict (Objective & Obstacle)

An argument, a struggle, a disagreement, a fight ... By any other name, conflict is the engine of drama. Without it a play has no drive, no forward momentum. Just as a car with no gasoline would be useless, it is the same with a play. If there is no conflict, there is no play. But, as Lajos Egri writes in his *Art of Dramatic Writing*, “. . . conflict grows out of character. The intensity of the conflict will be determined by the strength of will of the three-dimensional individual who is the protagonist.” Conflict is created when the character’s objective (a want, a need, or a goal), and the actions the character commits to achieve that objective, collide with an obstacle (the person or thing that stands in the way). When working together, these elements quite simply create what audiences see as the plot.

Enhance the Conflict

Conflict is at the heart of an effective, compelling drama. A character with an objective/want performs an action to achieve that objective, and encounters obstacles.

(Want + Action + Obstacle = Conflict) = Plot

The next step in deepening your understanding of conflict is to add secrets and subtext.

Secrets lend a character dimension, interiority, and can suggest a life and world beyond what actually happens on stage. In fact, we all know that if a secret is big enough, it can become a central feature of the character or a major turning point of the plot. Think of Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, John Proctor in *The Crucible*, or even Bruce Wayne in the various iterations of *Batman*. Each of these characters’ secrets plays a crucial role in how their stories unfold.

Subtext also gives a character (and ultimately the conflict) dimension and depth, but in a slightly different way. Whereas a secret can directly affect the overall arc of the play (depending on when, if, and how the secret is revealed), subtext works more (no pun intended) subtly. Because subtext occurs in the moment-to-moment communications between characters, its impact is more directly felt in the individual scene work as opposed to the big-ticket turns of the plot. When characters either say the opposite of what they mean, indirectly say what they mean, or hide their intentions altogether—they simply become more interesting. In addition, the conflict between characters unfolds in a much richer, less obvious way.

Use Imagination

At this point, you have most likely created characters and perhaps written a few scenes. What we often discover, however, is that the first plays of young writers will often tend toward soap opera, romance, or crime. Now certainly there’s nothing wrong with these genres. Melodrama, romance, and crime have sustained everyone from Shakespeare to the writer of latest Hollywood blockbuster. And indeed, you may only be writing from what you have seen (ex. pop culture—film, TV, etc.) or what you genuinely think of as “dramatic.” But what makes a play memorable is either how the writer has approached her material (ex. interesting craft devices, novel use of language, etc.), what she has to personally say about the subject, or the newness of the subject itself.

Develop a Theme

What is your play about? Why should an audience care about your characters and their actions? What do you as the writer wish to tell us? Theme is the animating intelligence of a play. It gives a story purpose and direction and keys the audience into the passion of its author. Out of the infinite number of choices a writer could make, a clear theme helps guide those choices in an intentional way and affords the writer the best opportunity to genuinely express his/her vision.

Stage Directions

Stage directions describe important actions, such as the actor spills coffee when he's about to lie. They don't tell the story, and they're not used for background info. Your story must be told through the events and actions of the scene. Be careful not to use a stage direction when you need a scene.

EXAMPLE: *Beth and Mark argue in the car. Beth leaves.*

This should be a scene. Beth and Mark's argument needs to be written as dialogue. The reader should be able to tell from what you write that Beth is leaving.

Save stage directions for changes for scene, entrances and exits, and to explain things that you see on stage during the real play that the reader wouldn't know from the dialogue, such as "she does a cartwheel".

Narrators

If you're relying on a narrator, there's a very good chance you're not writing a play, but a short story in play form. Don't be fooled. In a play, the events are revealed through character dialogue and action. Using a narrator takes that ways.

Things to Remember

The Protagonist (main character) must:

- have a clear, concrete objective (something he/she really wants to achieve)
- struggle to overcome obstacles in order to achieve that objective
- follow a clear journey
- be active – show us – don't tell us!

The Antagonist (the person who competes with the protagonist) must:

- try to stop the protagonist from getting what he/she wants
- create obstacles with which the protagonist has to struggle

Supporting characters must:

- somehow support, hinder (e.g. get in the way), or connect to the protagonist's journey in a meaningful way

Action must:

- reveal the characters' personalities
- be believable
- be appropriate for the stage
- lead to reactions from other characters – actions speak louder than words
- remember that you're writing a play for the theater, not a screenplay for film or a television comedy sketch

The plot must:

- follow basic dramatic structure and include a strong conflict
- have a clear beginning, middle, and end

Dialogue must:

- make things happen
- be specific to and help reveal characters' qualities
- not include too many long speeches or monologues
- create a variety of various length speeches within your dialogue

Stage directions must:

- reveal action that cannot be revealed through dialogue
- not direct the play and not tell the actors how to read a line, unless you want the line only read in one way.

Credits:

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