

Tips for Writing Plays

Overview

Writing a play or script can be as simple as telling your friends what happened last night at the park. In fact, that may be exactly what your play is about — something that really did happen to you and your friends. At least that's the way you will want your play to sound. More than any other form of creative writing, a play can bring your personal experiences (or your imaginings) to life in a dramatic way. The tips that follow should help you transform your best ideas into exciting dramas worthy of any classroom or stage.

The Playwriting Process

The first step that you need to know about writing a play is that it truly is a process of discovery. You can't possibly imagine how your play is going to turn out before you write it. In fact, if you choose real-life characters based on people you know, or through research, they will actually write part of the play for you.

All you need to do is put these characters "on stage," give them a problem to overcome, and then watch and listen to what they say and do. You become as much a reporter taking notes and recording conversations as a struggling playwright. Remember this as you write your play.

Setting: Describe where and when the story takes place.

Main problem: What is the main problem faced by the characters in the play? What do they have to do to overcome this problem?

Complication: What complication or added problem makes it difficult for the characters to find a solution to the main problem? How can this complication help you to add humor or suspense to your play? What can your characters do or say to help solve or further complicate the situation?

Solution: How do the characters finally solve the problem and bring the play to an end?

Message: What, if anything, does your play have to "say" about life to your audience? Is there a moral, a lesson, a point?

Play Structure

A play should begin with a dramatic situation that is so strained and unstable that it leads to action. This action either progresses, delays or reverses the events. Either way, it presents a new situation that is often less stable than the first. This process repeats itself until certain events result in a stable situation. The following is an outline of plot structure:

1. **Opening Situation:** The events at the rise of the curtain, including the exposition that gives the background or reveals what has happened before the curtain rises.
2. **Initial Incident:** The first event that suggests there will be a change in the situation; an incident to which you can trace all future action.
3. **Rising Action:** Additional events leading to the climax.
4. **Climax:** The highest point of emotional intensity that occurs near the end of the play and to which all action has been leading.
5. **Falling Action:** After the climax, the brief events in which the outcome is resolved.

Developing a Character

It's important to think about the **background** of the character:

- What is his or her name?
- How old is he or she?
- Where does the character live?
- How would you describe the family? The home?
- What is his or her favorite activity? Least favorite?
- What is the character proud of? How would he or she like to be remembered?
- What scares the character?

Helpful Hints

The best way to keep your play going is to simply let your characters talk things through. As the characters talk and act, they will reveal things about themselves and the situations they are in. Your job becomes mainly one of reacting to what each character says and does. Even though you are the one putting words into their mouths, it is more like reacting than writing. Each line or action leads naturally to the next. Remember: for each action, there is a reaction.

Finishing It Off

Your play will come to an end when a final solution is found to the main problem and each of the complications. Finding a good resolution may be your greatest challenge as a playwright. If you choose a resolution that is too obvious or predictable or one that is too far out of line, your audience will be disappointed. They will be looking forward to an ending that is at least a little bit surprising or unexpected, but also believable. End with a good closing line, one which brings it all together and also brings a smile, a laugh, a groan.

Correcting: Reviewing and Revising

The most important thing to look for in a finished play is whether it works. Read your play out loud, by yourself at first. Make changes and corrections. Then get several friends or classmates to read it aloud (each taking a part) while you listen. Ask for their comments and make changes as necessary. Finally, correct any spelling or mechanical errors.

Dialogue Writing Tip

Read your dialogue out loud whenever possible and use simple, everyday language. Keep your characters “alive” by giving them lines in all scenes in which they are present. Often, the minor characters can be given questions to ask, such as “What’s going on?” This gives you a way to explain something to your audience that otherwise is difficult to work into your dialogue. Make sure each character has a distinct voice (not only the tone of the voice but the way in which the character speaks).

Writing Tip

It is often a good idea to build the action in your play around one main character, the character who is most affected by the main problem or is most responsible for solving it. The other characters help (or hinder) this character. This character should have a distinctive personality, one that may change as the play progresses. This personality will determine how the person talks (loudly, softly, boastfully), what the person says, and how the other characters react to him or her. Your character needs actions – avoid having him or her just stand around talking.

Last Night's Paper: A Comedy in One Act

By Anne Walters

Sample Character List

BOBBY HARRIS – age 15, tall for his age, quarterback for his high school team.

CASEY JONES – age 16, chubby, awkward and easily embarrassed.

ANITA HARRIS – age 16, Bobby's sister, small, a quick thinker.

LENORE CHIPWORTH – age 17, tall, dignified, serious, with a secret longing to be popular and to fit in.

MRS. HARRIS – a parent.

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Sample Setting

TIME: After school on a Wednesday afternoon.

PLACE: Bobby's room.

AT RISE: BOBBY and **CASEY** have just come home from school.
They throw their books down on the floor.

BOBBY sits on the bed as **CASEY** stands before the mirror admiring himself.

BOBBY: (TOSSING PILLOW INTO AIR AND CATCHING IT) Funny you didn't see it. It was right there in the advertising section.