

The Student Guide to Writing: Playwriting

A competition for students at schools, colleges, Universities and elsewhere across the UK

LESSON PLAN ONE: GETTING STARTED

BY ROB DRUMMER, ASSOCIATE DRAMATURG, BUSH THEATRE

Please Note: This lesson plan can be followed individually or taught to a group, either way I have suggested timings for the exercises to keep you on track and to get the most from writing quickly.

1. WHAT THE AREA OF CRAFT THIS LESSON PLAN FOCUSES ON IS:

This lesson plan is focused on getting started and the very beginning of writing a play. I will offer some ideas and top tips as well as exercises to get you going and to demonstrate how story might work in your play. The objective of this lesson plan is to be able to understand what a play is, what it might look like and to demonstrate ways of starting out when considering a new story and the early stages of playwriting and to offer some general advice before you begin writing your play.

2. WHY THIS AREA OF CRAFT IS IMPORTANT:

Before we begin work on your play, I hope it's useful to share my top tips.

It might be helpful to start with what a play is, in its simplest form, so how about the following definition:

"A play is a form of literature written by a playwright, usually consisting of dialogue between characters, intended for theatrical performance rather than just reading."

The most important thing here is to remember that a play is intended for performance, to be experienced by an audience and to be performed by actors, so the words on the page are only the beginning. They are like the plans for a building or even a sketch prepared before a painting. A lot of the making of a new play happens with the script as a starting point, even when all of the dialogue is spoken. Remember as a playwright you are telling stories with words and pictures.

I like to also consider what a playwright is, so how about the following definition:

If you think about how the word playwright is spelt it has more in common with a shipwright or a wheelwright and that is to say that they are both makers, contributing to a much larger process. The playwright is vital but also is one of the collaborators in the making of the play.

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In my experience we all write differently, I've yet to meet two playwrights who mirror each other's writing habits or who approach writing plays in identical ways. Of course there are shared ways of working and similarities and one thing that does seem to be the same across the board is that we all need to start somewhere.

It is fair to say that plays come in all shapes and sizes and the more you read the more you will realise there are lots of ways to write, to arrange your writing on the page but there are some rules you could start to follow.

3. A SIMPLE EXERCISE OR EXERCISES USING THIS CRAFT ELEMENT TO DEVELOP YOUR PLAY:

Note: depending on how much time you have, you can complete all or some of these exercises or just read this as advice before you begin work on your play in the next lesson plan

1. Some Ways To Format Your Play On The Page

1. Start each new line of dialogue on a new line and include the character name at the start of the line.
2. If you are using stage directions, separate them from dialogue on the page and perhaps use italics, less is usually more and keep them limited to essential action that is vital to the storytelling.
3. Generally speaking, a big shift in time or location means a new scene might be useful, have a think about time and place and make a decision if your play works best with a break in the middle (the interval) or if it is best experienced in one sitting, over ninety minutes.
4. Consider the sound of your dialogue, the rhythm and pace of your play and think about characters who might interrupt each other, or might trail off at the end of a sentence. Some interesting ways to represent this include:

... represents a character trailing off at the end of a sentence, perhaps lost in thought.

/ represents a point of interruption, where the next character overlaps with their dialogue

5. Finally, always remember that page numbers are really helpful, your name and the title of the play should appear at least on the cover page and a

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character breakdown can be really helpful to anybody reading your play for the first time.

2. Thinking about what do you want to write about

So, now you have an idea of what a play is and that a playwright is one of many collaborators, as well as some tips for arranging your play on the page, what do you write about? What follows are three ways to get a conversation started around telling stories and three exercises I return to time and time again when writing or developing new plays.

1. What's Going On?

Theatre has the ability to respond relatively quickly to what is going on in the world, (far quicker than TV or film for example) and as a result plays often have a social or political starting point or issue at their heart. Although I think the best plays tackle single issues with complexity and subtlety it isn't a bad idea to train yourself to have opinions on what is going on in the world. I often use the following exercise to check in on the issues that I am more concerned with and think it is a great way to get stated.

Give yourself ten minutes to come up with three answers for each of the below and a further ten minutes to discuss (or to brainstorm why these are your answers if you are working on your own). You can always break a larger group in to three separate groups and give them one of the issues each and have a larger discussion. You might want to develop the exercise further and shortlist the most important issues, one from each group and then have a go at pitching a story that incorporates all three answers.

3 biggest global issues

3 biggest national issues

3 biggest personal issues

2. The Last Seven Days

Think back over the last seven days of your life, trying to remember the major events, turning points, discoveries and new experiences. Take your time to think about what was significant about the last seven days, (even if you feel as if nothing has happened, force yourself to make some decisions). What is important here is to break the past seven days in to a series of events that caused something to change, think of them as events that caused you to take action, or to move in a different direction, in an active way, an example could be:

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Monday: My mum had to stay late at work, I needed to collect my younger brother from school, where I met an old friend I hadn't seen for a long time. We arrange to meet later in the week, which has opened a can of worms for me, forcing me to confront the past when...

Ok, so the example starts getting a little fanciful and yet it should demonstrate how one seemingly small event can bring about dramatic possibility. If we were to continue the sentence, what happened in the past becomes an important consideration and could drive the beginning of a story.

Have a go at thinking about all of the events, at least one a day that brought about small or big change in your life over the past seven days.

Note: Give ten minutes, to think and note the events and a further five to discuss in pairs. Then allow enough time to discuss as a larger group or if working on your own, ensure you have at least seven events and in a final five minutes, make a note of the consequence of each event (what happened as a result of the event, the action)

3. What Happens At The End?

With all of this talk of getting started, I often find it important to think about the end. Pixar, who are some of the best storytellers working today encourage writers to think about where the story ends, as endings are difficult. Often, leaving the ending to be discovered can result in a play that loses its direction and in my experience, the middle of the story is a lot easier to tackle if there's a sense of where it might end.

3. A simple character exercise:

Stories happen because the characters want something, there's an obstacle and they need to do something to overcome it to achieve the thing they want. Therefore in my opinion it is the characters in a play that give us everything and when we are starting out I suggest a great place to begin is thinking about who you are writing about.

Here is a very simple character exercise to get a story started:

STEP ONE (5 minutes)

Think about two characters (A and B) and answer the following things about them below:

Character A - what do they want, what's in their way, what's their secret?

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Character B - how are they the obstacle to A's want. What lie have they told and what happens if it comes out?

STEP TWO (5 minutes)

Now take both of the characters and put them in a room together (you might want to think about details such as time of day, the type of room, what is going on outside).

STEP THREE (5 minutes)

Continue the dialogue that I have started for you below:

A: why am I only hearing about this now?

B:

Note: If working in a larger group, take 15 minutes to read the dialogue, at least three examples and start a discussion about what the characters want, their obstacles and secret etc. The objective is to reveal as much of the information as possible in the dialogue in interesting ways.

What the above exercise should help you explore as you are getting started is how to create dramatic action out of conflict in your play. It is important that your play contains events that add up to action, as it is the dramatic action and conflict in your play that will keep the audience engaged. The simplest way to create more conflict is to ensure that your characters want something but something is in their way, especially if this thing is another character, then the effort to achieve their want is the dramatic action of your play.

The next most important thing to consider at the beginning is the central question in your play. Be prepared for this to develop as you write and perhaps it will change all together but to think about a question at the beginning of your writing will keep you focused as you start to tell the story.

Tip: Keep the central question of your play in sight, on a piece of paper above your computer as you write so that you are always considering your audience and ensuring that they are being posed a question through your play.

Some other things to consider as you are starting out and a great way to get the creativity flowing is answering the following questions with a single sentence:

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1. What happens in your story?
2. Where does your story happen?
3. When does your story happen?
4. Why does your story happen? What causes events?

Finally, once you have written that first draft of your play read it aloud then put it aside for a day or so. When you return to it, read it again and when you've finished write a one paragraph story synopsis of 100 words. Then looking back over the 100 words have a go at reducing the synopsis to a sentence. Once you have this, read it and then cut the sentence down to seven words, then 3 words. Finally, no surprises here take the three words and reduce to a single word. The trick here is to not simply edit words out but to try and keep representing the whole story of your play, you can use new words and you don't have to worry about making sense beyond the sentence stage of the exercise.

4. FINAL ADVICE

Have people read your work aloud. They don't have to be actors, hearing it will help you massively. Playwriting is about telling story through dialogue so hearing it read will be an important test of the story.

Always think about your audience, sit down with somebody who hasn't read your play, describe the story to them. Do they get bored, when are they excited, what are they curious about?

Think about your perspective on the world - often people say write what you know. Sometimes this can be misunderstood as tell your own story, which isn't always interesting. Instead see this as about writing from your perspective, through your eyes, your ears, what can you write about the world we live in today?

Have two types of people read your work, someone close and someone not close. One will help you keep writing. The other will make you a better writer.

Get into the habit of writing. If you're short on time, try writing little but often.

Overwrite, then cut.

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Bad writing is ok. Get the story out. Get it written. Then make it better over as many drafts as you need. Keep hearing it. Be prepared to kill the best ideas in pursuit of the best story.

Ask yourself what your story is. You could try summarising it in a sentence or two and sticking it by your desk, so you can keep it in mind. Keep returning to it. Keep it fresh in your mind.