

Playwriting

You've probably seen a play before—if not on stage, then one that's been adapted for TV or film. Maybe you've read Shakespeare in English class, or had a friend who starred in a musical. The best way to really understand the way plays work, though, is to sit down and write your own.

Starting Your Play

If you've ever glanced at the text of a play, you'll see that it's pretty much all dialogue. But before you groan and think, "I can't write that much talking!" just remember that dialogue can

be really exciting—there can be really meaty, action-packed sections where your characters battle each other with words (and swords). Examples of good (and bad) dialogue are all around you! Oh, and if people tell you all the time that you talk too much, you have definitely picked the right challenge!

Elements You Will Usually Find in a Play

Characters: You're going to want some of these or else your actors will be very confused when they arrive for auditions! Start with the basics: their age and relationships to each other. Are they enemies or friends? Are they in love with each other? Do they go to school together? You can start by making a list of these people, who are known collectively as the *Dramatis Personae* (it's Latin for cast of characters). As a playwright, you'll want to know what drives each of your characters: their ambitions, their fears, and anything that may get in the way of their happiness or achieving their goals.

The Three Things That Drive Character Interaction

Once you have filled out the character worksheets you may want to think about what your characters do once they are on the stage. There are three major elements that cause what is known as "drama" in your play. These are called *the elements of Dramatic Action*, but you can just think of them as cool tools that will help you tell a great story:

1. **Discovery:** A character finds out that he was adopted. How does this change what he believes, or how he sees his family? What will he do because of it?
2. **Revelation:** A character admits that she witnessed the murder of her neighbor's pet chinchilla. How does this change the story?

3. **Decision:** A character decides to move to London to start a rock 'n' roll band. What happens next?

Scenes can combine any number of these elements to move the plot forward.

You can find out even more about characters by thinking about:

- What other characters say about them
- How they behave when they are with other characters
- How they behave when they are alone
- Which characters they become friends—or enemies—with
- What they say about other characters
- How they dress (and how the other characters dress by comparison)

Setting: Where and when will your play take place? Don't worry about drawing a set yet—leave that to the designer. All you need to worry about in your script is giving your actors, directors, and your collaborators what they *need* to know. This means you need to think of a time period, like, “in the time of the dinosaurs,” or “in Queen Elizabeth’s time,” or “yesterday at lunch.” You should also think of a place either in this world, like “Italy,” or, “the playground,” or out of it, like “Mars.”

Setting onstage can be divided into two categories:

1. **Physical Setting:** This includes things like your backdrop, and whether the scenes are set inside or outside.

2. **Props:** These are the things that the actors pick up or work around when on stage. For example, a vase would be a prop, so in Act II, Scene III, when your main character receives roses from their secret admirer, they have a place to put them.

Stage Direction: This can be very confusing for both beginning playwrights and professionals. Stage directions are there to give the actors, designers, and directors a clue about what the playwright had in mind when he or she was writing the play, and to fill in the details between the dialogue. Stage directions are not for the audience, only the people in the play, so the audience will never get to read them.

An important thing to know is that stage directions are not narration. This is the biggest difference between a novel or short story and a play. Only a few actions, outfits, or attitudes of your characters need to be described. Ditto for aspects of the mood, setting, and props. These details are part of the fun for actors, designers, and directors to fill in while producing a play!

In your stage directions, do include:

- Basic setting description
- Entrances
- Exits
- Physical action that must be performed for the dialogue to make sense
- Important pauses in the dialogue if not filled by an action

In your stage directions, do not include:

- Tone of voice or delivery hints for every line
- Full description of every costume every character is wearing
- Background on the sets or characters other than the most basic descriptions
- Characters' thoughts or intentions

Stage directions at the beginning of the play, act, or scene are sometimes longer to set up the action that follows. This is an example of an acceptable opening stage direction of a play:

SCENE ONE

(A secluded glen in a dark forest at dusk. It is a cold early spring and the leaves have not yet emerged. JENNY enters in a thin jacket, shivering. She is twenty-three, weak, and panting as she stops to catch her breath.)

Here's an example of a stage direction that would cause any reader of your play to throw your script across the room:

SCENE ONE

(A dark and ominous opening of trees in the deepest part of the forest outside of Monmouth, New Jersey. A light fog lifted hours ago, but the chill and dampness still clings to the not-yet-budded trees. The glade was left in this dense deciduous forest of maples and oaks when a fire, which was started by a lightning strike, swept through the forest some fifty years ago and destroyed a cottage that stood on this site. Now it is a spot for teens to gather and perform hazing rituals on their lesser peers. There is a crackling of branches and JENNY runs in, frightened out of her wits. She knows she needs to keep running, but she's cold and tired and wearing some skimpy sandals that don't stay on her feet well. Still, the fright is palpable as she gathers her thin jacket around her neck, covering the sparkling diamond necklace she once treasured as the symbol of her deep and authentic love for Howard.)

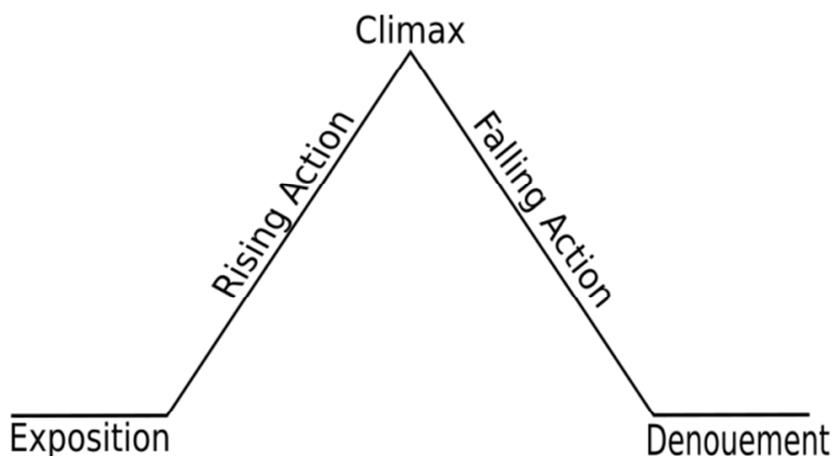
While the information in the second example may be interesting, it's nothing that the audience can *see*, and does not inform what the actor who plays Jenny should actually be doing besides the action which was described in the first example.

Don't worry about things like upstage, downstage or left or right. Just direct your characters in relation to the objects you've placed in their world, such as "BETH goes to the refrigerator" or "AMIR closes the window by the bed."

So now you've got your basics together! You've set the scene and cast your play in your head. Now you've got to start that story.

Plot:

Freytag's Pyramid is a diagram that shows the very basic structure of plot and story of modern drama.



Think of it as a picture of the ways plays have been written throughout the years. It's only a guide, and there are lots of great works that break this mold. Also remember that you can always move the parts of the pyramid around. Some plays end on the climax with no falling action. Some plays have no exposition at all. That said, here are the general **Parts of the Pyramid**:

The Set-up or Beginning: In the classic diagram of Dramatic Structure, things start with the dumping of information to bring the audience up to speed. This provides the "backstory" of the play, giving the audience the information they need to know about what happened before the play started.

A note on play beginnings: It's important to remember *why* your play is starting here and now. The audience will want something to start happening soon, so don't get too caught up trying to bring them up to speed on everything that happened to all of your characters before the play began. Leaving them a little bit in the dark can even help create suspense.

Exciting Event or Inciting Incident: This is the event that starts the play on the road to the action-packed part of the plot. It forces the main character to face his or her fears and finally start following his or her dreams. Without an inciting incident, your characters would continue to mull around talking about their backgrounds, which would make for a pretty boring play.

Rising Action: This will be the longest section of your play. Characters are developed in great detail, conflicts are shown between them, and friendships and relationships are revealed. It might be helpful to think of your play as a rollercoaster—the higher you go, the more suspenseful things get. Imagine you are climbing the biggest hill on a rollercoaster; the rising action is just like this. It is made up of many events (some of them unexpected), each of them building and building to the most exciting part of your play, the climax.

Climax: This is the moment where things get really exciting. The antagonist appears from out of the blue, the lottery is won, fortunes are lost, and audiences gasp. This is the moment at the very top of the rollercoaster, right before your high-speed drop! This moment doesn't last long, and neither should the climax in your play—it should last just long enough to make your audience ask “What's going to happen next!?”

Falling Action: The falling action is where you find out what happens after the climax. The conflicts and challenges in the previous scenes are worked through and resolved, and you are finally speeding down the tracks with your hands in the air. Does your antagonist get defeated? Do your protagonist's dreams come true? If so, how?

The End or Resolution: This is how things work out in the end. This is after your character realizes they've gotten, or lost, what they've wanted. An example: Is there a wedding or a funeral?

Remember that this structure helps guide you through the play-writing process, but it is not the only way to do it. You may just want to forget you saw the diagram and go with the ancient philosopher Aristotle's structure of a play: a beginning, a middle, and an end!

Style

And finally, a word about style. There are many genres, or types, of plays and many different styles. Much of this is determined by the way the play is put together. Comedies usually have happy endings and short dialogue. Dramas have sad endings and can have long sections of dialogue. The action you portray on stage and the characters' reactions to the action usually determine your style. If your characters are singing, odds are you've got yourself a musical! If everybody but your main character—or maybe even your main character—is dead in the end, you've got yourself a tragedy.

Now you know the main elements of a play, and you're ready to get started mapping out your own!

All right. This is the big moment, the one you've been losing sleep over: the formatting of the stage play. After all that tossing, turning, nail-biting, and solemn mirror-gazing, we're not sure how to break this to you, but...it's fairly simple.

You know what a play is, and maybe you've seen published versions before in school, but for the purposes of writing, it looks a little different.

Acts and Scenes

Plays are often broken into acts, which are large chunks of the play often containing multiple scenes. A full-length play can have 1 to 5 acts. Act breaks are dictated by plot like our beginning, middle, and end. Scene breaks are usually dictated by production (change of location, time elapses, etc.).

Act and scene designations should only appear at the top, centered in ALL CAPS on the first page of each act or scene, like this:

ACT I

SCENE 2

Acts are usually designated with Roman numerals or spelled out: Act II, Act Three.

Numeric designations are used for scenes: Scene 2, Scene 3, etc.

Each scene should start on a new page. Acts often have page dividers.

Stage Directions

A few things to remember:

Every time you mention a character in the stage directions, their name should be in ALL CAPS. This makes it easier for the actors, director, and team to scan the page and find what the actors are doing.

Stage directions are always enclosed in parentheses. Stage directions show only what is taking place on stage (what the audience can hear or see); they do not tell the interior life or previous life of people or objects.

There are three different kinds of stage directions:

1.) Scene Directions

- Left 3.5"
- Right 1"

These start the play or act, and yes, they are pushed halfway over to the right side of the page. This is where you give the basics of where and when this particular scene is set, and what is happening as the lights come up, and perhaps what has happened between the scenes as it applies to what is on the stage at that time, like this:

(A retro diner decorated with oversized pictures of Cadillacs. Along the back wall is a stool-lined counter and grilling station. A jukebox spits out classics of yesteryear.)

2.) Staging Directions

- Left 2.0"
- Right 1.0"

These describe what happens on stage during the scene. Entrances, exits, new characters, fights, light changes, and being chased by a bear:

DORA

Pick your poison

(WADE saddles up at a stool at the counter, a few down from her. She pushes the menu towards him. He glances at it.)

WADE

Can I get a grape pop? And fries.

DORA

Sure.

(DORA rings the order bell at the pass-through behind her.)

Order up! French fries

(She turns back to WADE)

Zat it?

3.) Character Stage Directions

- Left 3.0"
- Right 1.0"

These are always brief and fit right under the character tag, relating to that character. These types of directions give a clue to the style of the line. Often, they are line directions, such as "waving him off" or "sing-song" or "whispering to ROBERT". These should be used sparingly. They are needed only when a reader wouldn't understand what was going on without them:

DORA

(with a smile)

I wish you'd get out of here.

Dialogue

Character Tags

Character tags are indented at about 4". You can center them, but most writers find it easier to set a single tab for the Character Tag. The dialogue itself is flush left.

Use all capital letters to identify the character speaking. You can use their full name or a shorter version such as a first name or last name as long as it's unique within your draft, like so:

WADE

You have coffee on?

DORA

Coffee? Aren't you a little young for coffee? I can make you some hot cocoa.

WADE

Hot cocoa's for old ladies.

DORA

And mouthy teenagers.

WADE

I'll have a soda, then.

Margins

- Top: 1.0"
- Bottom: 1.0-1.5"
- Left: 1.5" (scripts are three-hole punched so leave more room on the left)
- Right: 1.0"

Headers

Upper right corner—start on the first page of dialogue—use a roman numeral for the act and then the page number. Start numbering over with each act. Each act is numbered consecutively through the end of the act: i.e. I-1, I-2, etc. If your play has only one act, then don't worry about it.

Footers

Place the name of the play in the lower left of the footer. You can put your name there too, just keep it all on one line. Some playwriting competitions like to read plays without any info about the playwright appearing on the pages, so be sure to check submission guidelines before printing it out.

Some Other Notes

Interruptions

If a character is interrupted, it's common to use a dash to represent where they were cut off. If a character trails off in their dialogue, an ellipsis follows the last intelligible bit of their dialogue.

Voice Over/Off Stage

If a character is only heard and not seen, either V.O. for Voice Over or O.S. for Off Stage is used in parenthesis after the character tag on the same line.

Songs

If a character is singing, as in a musical, just put the lyrics of the song as dialogue in italics. You can keep the line breaks (as in poetry) for the lyrics.