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DELAWARE YOUNG PLAYWRIGHTS FESTIVAL

DYPF 2026-2027 Playwrighting Guide and Tips

What is a Play?

Thoughts on what makes a play a play from DYPF Director Amy Dugas Brown

A play is something that happens in front of a live audience, and that quality of liveness is an essential part of the experience of the play. Before writing, consider why does this story need to be a play? Why not a movie, a novel, a short story or a tv show? Ask yourself why, and how, does this story benefit from being shared in a room with living, breathing participants - both artists and audience together.

When I'm directing a play, I listen to it to find out how it wants to cast a spell on the audience. That's my way into it. How does this play want to change the present moment on purpose? How does it reach out into the audience and affect them as the play unfolds before them, alive and immediate? How can my collaborators and I use inherently theatrical elements to cast that spell on the audience to change their day, or their point of view, or their relationship with the world, or their relationship with other people, if only for the brief time they spend inside the world of the play.

Speaking of world building, that's one of the best jobs you have when you write and make a play. You are building a whole new world - whether you're making a realistic play or piece of science fiction. Frances Hodges says that all plays are poetic representations of something else, and I think he's right. Even the most realistic of plays are a representation of something, so consider how you elevate the person, the place, event and idea you are representing. When you write a play, you are creating your own system, a place where things make sense within the context of your creation. Logic plays an important part in your system, but not the earthbound logic that constricts us here in the "real world." You can create a world where dogs speak English or humans have colonized Mercury, but then everything in play has to make sense in that context, within that system of belief.

For instance, in last year's festival, a student wrote a play where a character portrayed fog as the physical embodiment of depression. The character was a man who spoke and interacted with the other characters, but still remained fog throughout. This worked because it worked within the system of the student's play. Does fog talk to us in "real life"? Probably not. But, can we hear voices in the fog? Absolutely.

Another thing that makes a play unique is how your collaborators interact with your work. In movies or tv, for the most part, directors and actors have agency to change your words. In the theatre, directors and actors must use the play exactly as it is written. To work within that framework, we go into the play and find evidence…about everything! Evidence about who the characters are, what they want, what is in the way of what they want, evidence about their emotional lives, their backgrounds and the world they live in (the world of the play), and what means the most to them. It is then the director, designers and actors job to create an interpretation of your work in four dimensions - yes four! theatre happens in space-time - that delivers your play to a live audience in the most dynamic and impactful way possible.

Here are some reasons that some incredible - and famous, and successful - playwrights have defined what makes a play and why they write them. Perhaps it will help as you consider how to build a world, and cast a spell of your own.

Pulitzer Prize Winning Playwright Lynne Nottage

"It's an opportunity for us to breathe the same air and exchange energy, and to have a really dynamic, vital conversation in ways that we can't do in any other forum... That's what I love, and I think it's become increasingly rare."

Pulitzer Prize Winning Playwright August Wilson

"I was, and remain, fascinated by the idea of an audience as a community of people who gather willingly to bear witness... the communal nature of the audience is like having five hundred people read your novel and respond to it at the same time. I find that thrilling."

Two-time Pulitzer Prize Finalist Playwright Sarah Ruhl:

"...the theater is one of the few places left in the bright and noisy world where we sit in the quiet dark together, to be awake."

"Theatre is, at its roots, some very brave people mutually consenting to a make believe world, with nothing but language to rest on."

Pulitzer Prize Winning Playwright Tony Kushner

Theatre brings people "face to face with a more essential sense of what human beings are... stripped down... freed of the trappings of everyday life."

Pulitzer Prize Winning Playwright Annie Baker

"I ended up becoming a playwright because you can be grammatically incorrect: people speaking in bad poetry or people attempting to speak well and sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing... Playwriting was actually a way for me to celebrate my complete inability to write a sentence and speak a sentence."
Pulitzer Prize Winning Playwright Tennessee Williams viewed a play not as a literal but as a vehicle for "truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion."

a First Draft vs. THE First Draft

There's a big difference between a first draft and The First Draft — and it's important to know which one you're working on.

Writing is a process of finding questions to answer that were not previously apparent.

"What happened?" Your first draft tells the story **to yourself.** It will be raw and unrefined. Focus on the plot. At this point, plot points can be Point A happened "and then" Point B happened "and then" Point C happened "and then" the Climax, Point D, happened "and then" Point E ended the story. The First Draft will come in and add context.

Tip: A First Draft

Be mindful of how many characters you have, it is difficult to cut later when they have become crucial to the story. Be mindful of how many settings you have as it is hard to justify multiple locations in a short stage play.

"Why?" The First Draft is the version that's ready to **tell the story to others.** The question "why" leads to the discovery of "the who," "the what," "the where," and "the when" of the play. These questions will add context and make the story clearer even if the goal of the story is to be ambiguous.

Tip: Don't Try to Do Everything at Once

Once you start rewrites and edits for The First Draft and later drafts, don't to fix EVERYTHING in one draft — character, setting, dialogue, action — all at the same time. That tends to lead to a draft where things feel uneven.

Instead, plan. Write down what you want to work on. Choose ONE THING AT A TIME — maybe character motivation one day, then dialogue the next. Take it step by step and give each part your full attention. **ASK QUESTIONS**. If you already have an answer, then maybe work to make it more apparent in the dialogue or action. If your answer to your question when rereading your stage play is "I don't know," then you get to create and find the answer based on the text that you have written and all of the pre-work you did in creating this story. There may be times where you are in the midst of rewrites, and you realize you need to go back to your pre-work on characters or setting that will help answer the questions you ask.

What is a Stage Direction?

A stage direction denotes important aspects of the stage play that are not in the dialogue. The most important part of a stage direction is not to direct or design. The dialogue is what reveals character not the stage direction. Stage directions should trust the director, actors, and design team to be able to do their jobs well.

Things to note in stage direction:

- Props if mentioned again later
- Setting changes
- Sound effects (phone ring)
- Costume changes (winter coat)
- Character entrance and exits
- The metaphorical mood of the play and how it changes

Things **NOT** to note in stage direction:

- Actor location on stage
- How a character feels
- What the set looks like
- Lighting shifts in focus

When reading older scripts, the "stage direction" may include actor location, lighting shifts, set shifts, but that is because these scripts were often edited or written after the first production of the show that were written, so that those reading the script, not to put it on stage, can see what could be happening on stage in that scene. Oftentimes, actors cross out stage directions because if it is not in the dialogue, then it is not real. Directors may cross out certain stage directions, so that they have freedom to direct.

Elements of a Stage Play

There are four primary elements to a stage play, they are setting, dialogue, character, and action. While it is important to know all elements of your story in depth individually, these elements do not act independently of one another. Setting helps inform dialogue and character. Dialogue helps to inform the character, setting, and action as it is the explicit element that drives the story forward. Character helps inform dialogue, setting, and action as it is the implicit element that drives the story forward. Action is informed by and informs setting, dialogue, and character.

Setting

A well-developed setting is one that is believable in the story being told and has meaning to the character(s). While the setting informs what the set will be, the setting is not the set. A setting can at times be thought of as another character within the world of the play as it affects the action and characters within the play.

- ***Supports the story** – It helps explain why events happen the way they do.*
- ***Shapes the characters** – It influences how they think, feel, and act.*
- ***Guides the audience** – It helps them imagine the world of the play clearly.*

Example: Clue by Jonathon Lynn, Hunter Foster, Eric Price, and Sandy Rustin

The stage play describes the setting in two sentences – A deserted mansion. New England, 1954.
A link to a PDF of the stage play can be found here: https://www.maitlandreptheatre.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CLUE-on-stage-by-Jonathan-Lynn.pdf

Steps to Building a Strong Setting:

1. ***Be Specific But Not Too Specific** – Know the location, or locations if the script warrants. Know where in the world as specific as possible this story happens, using the example, maybe not just New England, but on the coast of Rhode Island. Know the year, the month, the time of day. This will help the director, actor, and designers create the world onstage.*
2. ***Choose the Right Setting** –The setting should influence the plot and character choices. The setting affects and is affected by what happens in the action and the characters that live in this world. Let characters interact with the setting to reveal emotions or background.*

Questions to Ask Yourself When Building Your Setting:

- *Why is this place important to the characters?*
- *Where and When does this take place? Why now?*
- *Could the story happen anywhere else?*
- *Does the setting help move the plot forward?*
- *How can the setting be used in dialogue?*

Dialogue

The Role of Dialogue in a Play

*In playwriting, **dialogue is the primary storytelling tool**. Since internal thoughts and narration aren't available, what characters say—and how they say it—must:*

- *Advance the plot*
- *Reveal character*
- *Engage the audience*

Tips for Great Dialogue And Questions to Ask

1. *Moves the story forward. Both the plot and the emotional story should progress with each line of dialogue. Does it move the story or relationships forward?*
2. *Character specific. A professor sounds different than a student. Someone from North Carolina sounds different than someone from Delaware and says different words for things. Does it reflect who the character is and what they want? Does each character have a distinct voice?*
3. *Use tactics in an attempt to win the conflict of the scene.*
4. *Dialogue is not conversation. Conversations are nonsensical as we meander through different topics. Dialogue is sensible. If there is small talk, it shows something about the characters. Is there subtext—what's being hidden, implied, or left unsaid?*
5. *Dialogue should be natural and engaging for the audience. Is the phrasing fresh, engaging, and believable?*

Three Levels of Dialogue

1) *Level One dialogue is every character says what they mean all the time. Most people do not talk in level one, we do not say what we mean, so it is often rarely used. This may be something like a declaration of love or reaction to pain.*
2) *Level Two is characters alluding to what they think or feel. This may be a conversation between two roommates about how one never cleans the dishes, but they alluded to the dirty dishes in the sink.*
3) *Level Three is characters talking about something completely different to what they think or feel. This could be a conversation between two roommates about what movie is better, but they are actually discussing how they cannot stay roommates anymore.*

Creating a Character's Voice Through Punctuation and Grammar

Grammar is a tool that is designed to be broken when creating dialogue. People, for the most part, rarely are grammatically correct. Theatrical punctuation is different than grammatical punctuation as they serve different purposes. Theatrical punctuation help the actor with the rhythm of the words.

How punctuation in playwriting translates on stage:

- *Comma: A breath, a quick break in the idea.*
- *Dash: A cutoff as though they just stopped the thought in the middle. Someone interjecting or they realized that they've said too much.*
- *Ellipses: A trail off. As though they forgot what they were saying.*
- *Exclamation point: Signifies intensity, not necessarily volume.*
- *Period: A pause.*
- *Question Mark: An inflection change.*

Other grammatical tools translated on stage:

- *The space in between words. You can add spaces and get rid of spaces between words to help dictate the speed in which the line should be said. Example line of dialogue: Ilovemydog. This line should be one breath and spoken quickly as though it was one word. Whereas, the example line written as: I love my dog. This should be spoken with space in between.*
- ***Bold dialogue,*** *dialogue in ALL CAPS, or* ***bigger font*** *is translated as words to be spoken louder.*
- *Smaller dialogue would be translated as quieter.*
- *Words italicized or <u>underlined</u> are usually deemed to be important words.*

The grammar and punctuation used will help to create a character's vocal rhythm which helps dictate their voice.

Characters

Characters are the foundation of a great play. Playwrights must reveal character through dialogue, action, and their relation to the setting. A well-crafted character is shaped by knowing their backstory, daily life, values, and hopes, as well as their objective in each scene and how they go about completing their objective.

Each character should feel unique, driven, and behave authentically within the world of the play. When done well, this approach makes characters feel real, engaging, and unforgettable on stage.

Questions to Help with Creating Characters

- *What does each character want? In the entire stage play? In each scene?*
- *How does their backstory affect who they are now? How does it affect the tactics that they use?*
- *What is their voice? Is it clear?*
- *What is the relationship between characters?*
- *What is their relation to the setting?*
- *What is their internal conflict? What is their external conflict?*
- *Do they accept or resist change thrust upon them?*
- *What questions do they create in relation to the theme of your play?*

Types of Characters

There are two primary types of characters in plays. One is a dynamic character that changes based on the plot, the other characters, and the setting of the play. It might be a big change that is noticeable and able to be tracked. The other is a static character who often acts as a catalyst for the dynamic character. A static character is often times mistaken as a flat character as they do not experience change or growth which affects how the action and plot unfold.

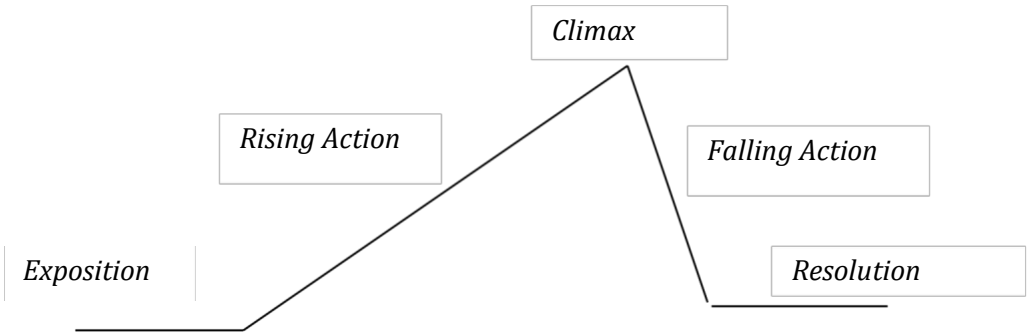
Action

The Role of Action in a Play

Dramatic action is defined by what tactics the characters use to get what they want and the consequences that follow. Dramatic action drives the plot forward and keeps the plot from feeling as though it is joined by "and then." There is external and internal dramatic action based on what is seen within the plot and what changes are found within the character.

Structure of Action / Plot

*While many plays follow a structure often called the **plot pyramid**, this is a suggested structure, but not a mandatory one.*



Exposition

- *Introduces characters, setting, and backstory. Where are we? Who are they?*

Rising Action

- *Main conflict develops. What do they want? What's at stake if they don't get what they want?*
- *Tension builds between characters as they attempt different tactics. How will they get what they want? What's in their way?*

Climax

- *Main conflict reaches its head and a major decision or confrontation occurs. Who wins? Why?*
- *Stakes and emotions are at their highest.*
- *Is it tied to the main characters' goals?*
- *Does it feel earned and powerful?*

Falling Action & Resolution

- *How have the characters and world changed?*
- *Does the ending logically follow what happened in the climax?*

What is a Scene?

A scene is a unit within the script in a continuous location and time to advance the plot of the story through dramatic action. A scene between multiple characters requires tension and conflict between the two characters. The plot pyramid works for both the overall stage play and each individual scene.

Glossary of Theatrical Terms

Act (in a play)

A division of text that groups related scenes together in a way that structures the narrative.

Adlib

A moment of improvised and spontaneous dialogue within a scene that can be specifically notated in the script.

Action (two meanings)

- *Engine of drama, what spurs the story forward*
- *OR: a tactic a character uses to get what they want*

Arc

The shape of the narrative that includes the overall rise and fall of action over the course of the play.

Beat (two meanings)

- *The smallest unit of action in a scene, marked by a shift in tactic, action, objective or emotional state*
- *OR: a notation that playwrights use in scripts to indicate that an actor should take a "beat" or a brief moment without talking. This kind of beat is often used to indicate that a character is taking a moment to process a rush of new information/thoughts, a recognition of a power shift, or subtext of another variety. Playwrights also use this notation to shape the rhythm, pace and musicality of the play.*

Blocking

The specific and repeatable staging the director and actors find during rehearsal.

Climax

The turning point in the dramatic action, the highest point of tension/emotion, the culmination of the conflict.

Dialogue

The words spoken aloud by characters that reveal character and drive plot.

Diction

The way language is used by the playwright. Diction includes word choice, phrasing, cadence/rhythm, metaphor, alliteration, imagery, punctuation, the use of slang and colloquialism and more.

Dramaturg

In a new play process, a dramaturg is a creative collaborator who advises the playwright on their work. Rather than an editor, a dramaturg gives meaningful feedback and is an advocate for the play, and helps the playwright see their work more clearly.

Economy in Storytelling

How to tell a story as efficiently and effectively as possible. There are a few phrases that go along with this idea: Show Don't Tell, which is mentioned later, and Kill your Darlings. Kill Your Darlings means to cut subplots and limit redundant scenes or ideas.

Fourth Wall

The imaginary barrier separating the actors from the audience that can be broken on purpose by playwright, director and/or actor. When an actor speaks directly to the audience it is called, "breaking the fourth wall."

Given Circumstances

The historical, social, cultural and environmental conditions in a play. These are the who, what, when, where, why and how of the world of the play. As a whole, the given circumstances provide the context of the play. These conditions consider:

- *The historical, social and cultural background of the setting/world of the play*
- *The historical, social and cultural background of the characters in the play*
- *The belief systems in the world of the play*
- *The background of all characters*
- *The desires and motivations of the characters in the play right before the action of the play begins.*

Inciting Incident

The event that triggers the main action.

Improvisation

An unscripted form of performance where actors create all characters and actions spontaneously, often within a framework of a prompt or set of circumstances. Can be used to inform playwriting in a workshop.

Internal Logic

The consistent system present in a play that guides and governs that play's universe. If the play is absurd, fantastical, or otherwise completely "unrealistic," it still has a set of rules and laws that are present in that imaginary world. This internal logic is what allows an audience to suspend their disbelief and connect to the story being told.

Mood

The emotional atmosphere of a play.

Monologue

A longer chunk of text spoken by a single character within a scene.

Motivation

The reason why a character says or does the things they say and do. Motivation is closely tied to both objectives, tactics and subtext.

Objective

What a character wants in a specific scene. Objectives are driven by action and impacted by stakes.

Obstacle

Any barrier (internal, external, psychological, physical) that gets in between a character and what they want.

Pace

The tempo, rhythm and speed of the text, which can be present in playwriting by the deliberate use of language, punctuation and notation.

Point of View

The lens through which the audience experiences the play. This point of view is chosen by the playwright and interpreted and brought to life by the director, designers and actors.

Resolution

How the story is resolved after the climax, it reveals how the status quo of the world and the characters have changed as a result of the conflict/climax. It often brings closure to an audience, but does not need to do so.

Scene

A structural subdivision within an act, usually a continuous action that occurs without a major shift in place or time

Show Don't Tell

Using action, subtext and character choices/tactics to reveal backstory instead of relying on exposition or dialogue that merely explains the characters or circumstances.

Soliloquy

A chunk of text where a character speaks their inner thoughts aloud to themself or directly to the audience.

Stakes

What a character could gain or lose as the result of their actions/tactics. Stakes add urgency, consequence and vitality to a play.

Style

The accumulation of choices that an artist makes when creating that makes their work distinctly theirs.

Subtext

The hidden meaning behind what a character says or does in a play. It is the thing the character really means, intends or wants to say while literally saying or doing something else. Subtext can be subtly different than what the character says or does, or drastically different.

Tactics

Related to action, tactics are the specific things a character says or does, or a method they use, to get what they want. Characters can and often do change tactics in the face of an obstacle.

Three-Act Structure

A three-act structure typically includes the following: the setup, rising action/confrontation, and climax/resolution.