

Middle/HighSchool Playwriting Guide

PLAYWRITING: in a Nutshell

Drama is defined as action. A play, therefore, is the instrument of action.

Every play has a *beginning, middle, and end*. Below you will find definitions for the main parts of a play. These are meant to help explain how a play works. You may notice that these elements are similar to those that you would find in many literary works and movies.

Understanding these literary/theatrical “ingredients” will help you to write a better play.

PLAY “INGREDIENTS”

Characters: Every play has to have a main character and other supporting characters. *Your main character is the one with the goal or objective that defines the plot.* Your character’s goal is that which he/she wishes/needs to achieve.

Plot: The story of the play, it comes about due to your main character’s goal/objective and the actions he/she takes to overcome obstacles and achieve their goal. Central to the Plot is the:

Conflict: Arises when the main character meets an opposing force. Conflict is what makes the plot progress and ultimately leads to the climax of the story. If everything were easy, there would be no need for the play to happen; therefore there must be conflict.

Dialogue: The words spoken by your characters.

Stage directions: Directions for either the actor or director of a play. These are not spoken during the performance, and are only used to help the director, designers and actors understand the play.

PLAY STRUCTURE

There are many story structures a playwright can work with. Below is a brief outline of traditional Western story structure (following Freytag’s Dramatic Arc) because it is the one we see most frequently utilized in the States and is a good general baseline to work from if you’re writing a play for the first time.

BEGINNING:

Exposition: Important information about the *Backstory* of your play/characters/etc. (who these characters are, where the play is located, what the conflict is, etc.) Exposition can come at the beginning (think Shakespeare’s prologues) but more often it is something that is sprinkled heavily throughout the beginning of the play, and lightly on into the middle and end.

Example: In Romeo and Juliet the prologue tells us who our main characters are and that the two families are locked in a feud before we ever meet Romeo or Juliet.

*Not every play utilizes a prologue – in fact it is primarily seen in Greek or Medieval plays! Modern audiences don’t expect prologues and prefer action over too much explanation.

Exposition, then, is something that is most often given via dialogue between characters, and mostly in the first few scenes of a play.

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Inciting Incident: That which sets the plot in motion. *The reason for the play.* Without an inciting incident, the characters would go on about their business and there would be no reason for the play to happen.

Example: In the Three Little Pigs – The story happens because the wolf decides he is hungry and goes looking for lunch. Without the Wolf showing up in “Pig Town” the story wouldn’t happen. Therefore, it is the Wolf’s arrival with a hungry belly that is the Inciting Incident.

The playwright has to know what the inciting incident is, but it might happen before the actual play begins (We don’t have to see the Wolf realize he’s hungry - the play can begin when the wolf shows up at the first pig’s house. We will see he is hungry by the actions he’s taking)

MIDDLE:

Rising Action: This term refers to the build up of excitement in the script – your play is building towards a climax – it should always be working towards the climax, and those scenes, or actions leading there is called Rising Action.

Turning Point/Point of no Return: The point at which the climax becomes inevitable.

Climax: The high point of your story – the point at which the opposing forces face-off for good.

END:

Falling Action: the action occurring after the climax. We call this “falling action” because the anticipation that was building has exploded at the climactic point and now we are winding down to the “New World Order”

New World Order: This is how the world of our play will go on now that the characters have won or lost their goal. This is the final image your audience is left with.

Example: At the end Wall-E, he is happily in love, he is reunited with his cockroach friend, and everyone returns to Earth, where robots and humans will work together.

When writing a play, you need to make sure you use a script format that is easy to read. There are a lot of different opinions on how a script should look. We recommend using the very simple template illustrated on the following page.

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TITLE OF MY PLAY (Always give your play a title!)
By MY NAME (Don't forget your name!)

TIME AND PLACE: A Playground in Ames in the year 1942 (Explain where the play happens and when:

CHARACTERS: (List your characters and anything we need to know about them:)
LISA - a 5 year old girl
BENNIE - Her toy Tiger

Then begin writing your script. Start by giving a brief description of the world your play is happening in, then the dialogue. Remember to tell us who is talking every time.

Stage Directions are usually written in italics, so they look different from dialogue. It is also helpful to indent them just a bit.

Lisa, a 5 year old girl, sits on the merry-go-round in the middle of a park in Ames, Iowa. It is fall, so there are leaves on the ground. She talks to her toy Tiger:

Always skip a line between stage directions and dialogue...

LISA

I wish we could have cake for lunch today. Cake is the best. I don't understand why mom and dad say I can only have cake after I've finished my supper. Cake should be something you get to eat all the time, any time you want!

To her surprise, Tiger actually answers her! She almost drops the toy in surprise!

TIGER

I feel the same way about roast chicken!

(Make sure you also skip a line between different character's lines)

LISA

Aah! You can talk?

TIGER

Yes. And I'm very hungry. Do you have any roast chicken?

LISA

I'm sorry, but no. How come I didn't know you talked?

TIGER

Well, I am very shy and also, you never talked about food with me before. Food is my favorite subject.

LISA

I bet mamma would give me a bit of roast chicken if I ask.

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TIGER

I could help you eat it so that you have room for cake afterwards!

LISA

Sounds like a plan!

Lisa and Tiger run off to find mama.

THE END.

On the next page, you will see the script again, without writing notes, so you can better see what the format looks like and use it as a guide for writing YOUR play!

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