

How To Write a Play:

Some Basic Playwriting Tips

Start with an Idea. Find an idea for the basis of a play, usually with a plot and storyline that involves a series of events. A play can be about something that really happened or something fictional. Anything from a news story to a photograph to an interesting person might spark an idea.



Determine the Conflict. Think of a conflict, or a main problem that the characters face, which will be central to the plot, to make it more dramatic.

Setting. The setting of a play is where it takes place. This could be a historical era, a foreign country, a single room or even inside a vacuum. Scene changes are a good time for characters to switch locations.

Structure. Remember our plot diagram? A play's plot usually proceeds in the same way: (1) the beginning, or **exposition**, sets up the characters, setting, and conflict, (2) characters try to solve the problem, creating the **rising action**, (3) their action leads to the **climax**, and (4) the **falling action** leads to a resolution.

Characters. Try having somewhere between three and eight characters. Each character, no matter how minor, wants something and has a goal or objective. List each character and give detailed descriptions for each one, including their name, age, physical appearance, personality, hobbies and interests, fears, secrets, abilities, motivations, occupation and relation to other characters. Even if the characters are animals or inanimate objects, they'll still have unique qualities.

Dialogue. A play is nothing without dialogue, the conversations characters have. As in stories, dialogue must move the story forward, reveal the characters' relationships to each other, and show their personalities. Dialogue should sound believable and real—there can be pauses and contractions, just like in everyday speech. It helps to study real-life conversations and practice reading dialogue aloud to see how it sounds.

Format. Using the correct playwriting format helps put all these aspects together in an understandable way. An example of playwriting format follows below. Note that when writing character descriptions, the more detailed they are, the more depth actors can give to their performance. On the other hand, *don't overdo it* at this stage.

Stage Directions are messages in parentheses, aligned to the **right** margin, from the playwright to the actors and crew telling them what to do and how to do it. They should be brief, and written in the present tense. They describe action and visuals, not inner thoughts.

Character names in stage directions are written in ALL CAPS.

Below is a brief example.

THE SNOW DAY

By Elise Williams

Cast of Characters:

KARLA: a friendly, 30-something mother

JACKIE, her 13 year-old daughter. Moody and very neat.

CHLOE, Jackie's younger sister, 11 years old. Very bouncy.

SAM, Karla's husband and JACKIE's father, always worried about work

BONEHEAD, a 13 year old neighbor of JACKIE, sometimes teases her

Setting:

The play takes place in a suburb of Boston during a particularly snowy day when schools are unexpectedly closed.

SCENE 1

(Morning, snow falling. Sidewalk in front of a suburban house. JACKIE appears in front of the house bundled up for winter weather and wearing a backpack. KARLA runs out of the house to catch JACKIE.)

KARLA: Jackie, wait! The radio just announced that your school is closed today because of snow!

JACKIE: Really? You're not just teasing me, are you? Do I really get a snow day?

(CHLOE enters, also wearing a backpack, and walks over to JACKIE.)

CHLOE: Hi Jackie, what's going on? Aren't we walking to school together today?

JACKIE: Leave me alone!

CHLOE: What'd I do?

JACKIE: As if you don't know!

CHLOE: Well—

JACKIE: You're just... just the worst! I'm going to school. Alone!

KARLA: But it's a snow day, sweetie—

(JACKIE storms off stage in a huff with Chloe in pursuit. SAM walks up the drive.)

KARLA (continued): What's up?

SAM: Road's closed at the top of the hill. Where they going?

KARLA: Beats me.