

# How To Write a Play

## *Some Basic 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.

# Developing Dynamite Play Dialogue

In an earlier chapter, we learned some tips for writing good dialogue for fiction. For review, here's what we said:

## Review:

- Every sentence of dialogue *must* have purpose in advancing the story or revealing character. If it doesn't, cut it -- be ruthless!
- Cut hello and goodbye. **NO CHIT CHAT!**
- Never make readers sit through the same conversation twice.

## Remember: Plays are Meant to be *Heard*

Seeing stage action is important in both theater and film, but don't underestimate the importance of speech, usually in the form of dialogue (in short, speech between two or more characters). Sometimes character will speak alone in a *monologue*, and some even have a narrator, but the principles involved are largely the same. We'll use the term *dialogue* here to refer to any speech in a play or film script.

Playwrights and screenwriters use dialogue to convey information (such as antecedent action), to reveal character, and to move the plot. There's no silent reading in the theatre! And that means *dialogue is a vital element* in the playwriting and screenwriting process. It won't matter if you have the greatest story and the most interesting characters—if your dialogue is unnatural, stilted, or just plain boring, your audience will not pay attention.

How do you make your dialogue the best that it can be? How do you know if your dialogue is going to capture an audience and keep them engaged? Here are three easy to follow but extremely important dialogue development tips.

### 1) After You Write It, Hear the Dialogue Read Aloud

Don't assume that what works for stories also works for plays. They are completely different worlds.

Seeing dialogue is just not the same as hearing dialogue. You can't see rhythm. You can't see pace and volume.

Dialogue is best when it *sounds like* natural speech (not that it *is* natural speech, which tends to ramble). People don't always speak in grammatically correct sentences. A well-written grammatically correct sentence on the page can spell disaster when read aloud because it sounds unnatural and can be hard to listen to. (Unless, of course, you've specifically set up a character to sound this way.)

It's not enough for you to sit in a room and read your own dialogue aloud. That's multitasking, and it doesn't allow you to focus solely on listening.

You have to get into the audience's place. What exactly does the audience hear when actors speak your words? Does it sound right?

## 2) Pay Attention to Punctuation

**No, I'm not kidding: Punctuation can be one of a writer's greatest assets.** Why ? Have a look:

A statement is different than a question.

A statement is different than a question?

A question is different than an exclamation?

A question is different than an exclamation!

Each has a different sound, a different force. It's important to convey to an actor through punctuation what sound and what force you have in mind for a line.

Punctuation also tells an actor where they're supposed to breathe, and where they're supposed to pause. Whether or not to leave a thought unfinished—

Punctuation tells an actor if their character is solid. Or excitable! If they babble or speak in clipped tones. Punctuation is vital in conveying subtext (what's going on in your character's mind while speaking) in your dialogue. That's a lot of information that shouldn't be left to chance.

You also want to be sure you're not overusing punctuation. Exactly how many exclamation marks are there in that emotionally charged scene in Act Two????!!! Do you really want the characters screaming at each other for five whole pages???? What will that sound like to an audience????????????????????

Once you get a handle on punctuation, focus on all the other structure forms that determine the sound of the dialogue: contractions, sentence length, slang, vocabulary. All of these elements contribute to taking dialogue to the next level.

## 3) Dialogue Must Be Character-Specific

Nothing takes an audience out of the world of the play more than inappropriate dialogue. And that has nothing to do with swearing! It's jarring when a writer creates a specific character whose dialogue doesn't fit their personality: Doctors who speak like teenagers. Urban hoodlums who speak like scientists. Characters for whom English is a second language with huge vocabularies. Characters who would never substitute "I do not" for "I don't." Exceptions are OK, but they should be the exceptions, not the rules!

**Is there a place for the unexpected? Of course!** Writing against a stereotype is a great way to make a character interesting or to present an unexpected twist. That's exciting for an audience. But these twists have to be thought out and *purposeful*. When you pay attention to the sound of your dialogue, to the structure of it, to the specificity of it, the more you'll capture your audience.

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