

What's are the Secrets of Writing a Good Play?¹

What is it that makes a good play or musical good? Characters? Plots? Wisdom? Honesty?

It is all of these things—and, of course, more.

When we sit down with writing a play in mind, how do we put it to paper effectively? How, when the last page is done, do we know if we have a "good" play? While ultimately this is subjective, there are many play writing approaches that will facilitate finding out whether or not you achieved your goal of writing a good play.

Getting Started. Imagine you have characters, a setting, and an incredible idea for a plot. How do you start? Where do you start?

Successful plays often start in the middle of something. At the beginning of a play called *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, we find our protagonist confronted by her landlady on the first page. The landlady is demanding the rent. This is an excellent device for introducing conflict and exposition. In the first moments of this play we learn about the landlady, the protagonist, and their relationship. The bonus is that we are immediately propelled into the action. People have to be interested in what is happening to really hear what you want to say. Get your audience into the action quickly and keep them there.

Characterization is crucial. Always remember that motivation is the key to strong characterization. Your characters must have a strong want or need that will enable them to take risks to get what they desire. Profile your characters before writing, so that you know them intimately. Avoid "author intrusion": imposing your will as an author on your characters. As a writer, you are kind of creating a "life." You must allow them to be themselves. Always ask yourself, "Would my character really speak or behave that way?" You must not interfere with your characters' pursuit of their goals.

To test your dialogue, ask some people to read your work aloud. A play must be heard to really be understood. Hearing your words come to life will tell you whether or not you achieved what you had in mind.

In order to develop a strong character, try to know all there is to know about him. You must know where the character lives and why. What does he or she do for a living? Is the character educated? Age, religious beliefs, political leanings, and social behavior are all parts of a person. These items may not be revealed in the final work, but a strong character study enables you to create a round and dimensional character. Think of all the influences and experiences in your own life that brought you to where you are today. Every one affected you, and affects you still. This may require a great deal of research.

Avoid making characters perfect people. The ideal person does not exist. Hamlet is a noble guy, but he also has a problem making decisions.

¹ by Troy M. Hughes; adapted by Joseph Sigalas

You may need to write a character that loves the dark while you are afraid of it. You cannot be every character you write. While I believe that a piece of us resides in every character we develop, we are not effective if we write ourselves.

Avoid idealizing characters. The ideal person does not exist. Hamlet was a great guy. But let's admit it, the man had a problem making decisions. Heroic Othello trusted the wrong man; he had bad judgment. Indiana Jones is brave, but also afraid of snakes. Don't be afraid of giving your characters a flaw, or even two. After all, nobody is perfect.

For many people, a good play says something about what it's like to be a human. Family, love, sad times, funny things that happen along the way: these are things we all deal with and with which we identify. The stage effects of the large-scale musical theatre production like *Spiderman* or *Wicked* have their place and are entertaining, but don't rely on that stuff too much.

Instead, use emotion. Use characters, and let them change in some way. Also remember that happy endings are great, but people don't necessarily need to leave the theatre happy to have enjoyed a play.

Also never forget the effectiveness of action. Think of William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker*, the story of Helen Keller. The play has a long but non-verbal scene in Act II that is well-worth reviewing. Non-verbal action can reveal much about a character, as well as be intriguing to an audience. Look for it in plays you see, and use it in your writing.

As you know by now, writing is not easy. It can be a painful and trying experience, to say the least. But if you have the desire to be heard and a need to convey your vision, you will be successful. Remember to know your medium. Strive to write efficiently and from the heart. If a director can visualize your story and an actor wants to play the role, you will have an excellent chance of getting your play produced.