



Thinking creatively: how to write... a play

Overview: Writing a play is not only about the writer, but it is about a collective process, involving actors and a director. Even though a play's script may be quite short it can take a lot of time to write and rewrite and rehearse – so you will need to manage your time very carefully.

Time: 30-60 minutes per activity

Teachers: You can use these activities as part of an ongoing series of creative writing and life skills exercises, following on from the other worksheets, or they can be stand alone activities. In the latter case, it may be best to look at some playscripts (the Macmillan Shakespeare series, for example) first.

Writing a play can be a great class activity, as it involves a number of students working to their different skill strengths. There can be more than one writer, as well as actors, a director, set designers, musicians, and so on.

Students: You can do some of these activities on your own – but if you want to perform your play you can ask your friends to participate.

Level: Intermediate

Introduction: Theatre or drama?

What is the difference between 'theatre' and 'drama'? 'Theatre' is when you go to a place called a 'theatre' and watch a play, where actors on a stage perform according to a script.

'Drama' is a word which describes exciting, surprising or unexpected events in our everyday lives. When you write a play, you are converting 'drama' into 'theatre.'

There are many ways you can do this. Let's look at some of them.

Activity 1: Starting points

Characters

In the [first activities of this series](#) you invented one or more characters and we looked at how to put these characters into a story. When writing a play, the process can be very similar. Now, however, you have to *visualise* your characters – you will have to say exactly what they look like, what they are wearing, how they are dressed, and so on.

1. In no more than 50 words, write a description of your character so clear that a director will know exactly how they look, move, talk.

Dialogue

Instead of starting with a character, you can start by writing down the things they say. Around 90% of a playscript is just dialogue. Go back to your notebook and find one of the conversations you have written down – then *work backwards* from it. Look at the words you have written, then remember – or imagine – who these people were.

2. Write brief descriptions of the people you listened to and then copy (and improve) their dialogue from your notebook into your script.

Improv!

'Improv' is short for 'improvisation'. Improv is a type of theatre (or comedy, or music) in which actors have a role – but there is no dialogue or script. They come together on a stage and say what they are thinking or feeling and the other characters respond. It can be scary to do improvisations at first – but also interesting to see what the actors come out with.

3. Improv is a good way of starting to write your script. Work in a group and do a 15 minute improvisation about your chosen topic. Take the best lines the actors say, and write them down. This will help you start your script. Be careful, this can easily fill 30, 40 or even 60 minutes so manage your time. If necessary, use a kitchen timer so that you don't get sidetracked.



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Activity 2: Formatting

If you look at a playscript, the most obvious difference between the script and a story is the way it is *formatted*. In a playscript, there is not one single block of text. Remember that a script is really a set of instructions for actors and the director.

To make it easier for them to read, a playscript is formatted like this:

<p>Act 1, Scene 1</p> <p><i>[The battlements⁹ of the King's castle, Elsinore, Denmark. It is night. A soldier, Francisco, is on guard duty¹⁰. Enter another soldier, Barnardo]</i></p> <p>Francisco: Stop! Who's there? Stop and answer me!</p> <p>Barnardo: Long live the King! I come to take your place, Francisco.</p> <p>Francisco: I'm glad. It's very cold. All has been quiet tonight. The ghost has not appeared.</p> <p><i>[Exit Francisco. Enter Marcellus and Horatio]</i></p> <p>Barnardo: Welcome, good Marcellus. And Horatio too.</p> <p>Marcellus: Horatio does not believe what we have seen, Barnardo.</p> <p>Horatio: That's true. I've never seen a ghost and never will.</p> <p>Barnardo: We've seen it twice. The ghost of our dead king was walking here.</p> <p>At just this time, last night...</p> <p><i>[Enter Ghost]</i></p> <p>Marcellus: Look! It is here again! It is the King. Speak to it, Horatio!</p> <p>Horatio: What are you? Why do you walk at night? You have the shape of the dead King of Denmark. Speak to me now and tell me who you are!</p> <p><i>[The Ghost walks on]</i></p> <p>Barnardo: It is angry and it walks away!</p> <p>Horatio: Speak! Speak! You must tell us what you are!</p> <p><i>[Exit Ghost]</i></p> <p>Marcellus: It has gone and will not answer.</p> <p>Barnardo: So now, Horatio. Do you believe your eyes or not?</p> <p>Horatio: It is the ghost of our dead king – King Hamlet. He's wearing armour¹¹, as he did in battle, When he killed old King Fortinbras of Norway.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">10</p>	<p>Act 1, Scene 1</p> <hr/> <p>Fortinbras and Hamlet had agreed to fight, Over a piece of land that both states¹² wanted. So Denmark won the land from Norway's king, Land which young Fortinbras now demands from us, Thinking our state is weak. So now our enemies prepare for war and so do we. Such war-like ghosts appear in time of trouble. Is this a warning to the state of Denmark?</p> <p><i>[Enter Ghost]</i></p> <p>Look where it comes again! If you can speak, then tell me why you're here. Oh, do not go again! Stay here and speak!</p> <p><i>[A cock¹³ crows. The soldiers try to stop the Ghost, but it walks away]</i></p> <p>Barnardo: It was about to speak, but then the cock crew.</p> <p>Marcellus: The bird of dawn warned it that the night was over. When daylight comes, all ghosts return to darkness.</p> <p>Horatio: Yes, look, the sky is red with the first light of dawn. We must tell Hamlet we have seen his father. The ghost will speak to him, I'm sure of that.</p> <p>Horatio: <i>But look, the morn in russet mantle clad, Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill; Break we our watch up, and by my advice Let us impart what we have seen tonight Unto young Hamlet. For upon my life, This spirit dumb to us will speak to him.</i></p> <p><small>russet = red-brown mantle = cloak dew = water seen on the ground in the early morning watch = guard duty impart = tell</small></p> <p>Marcellus: Let's do it. It's our duty.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">11</p>
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You will see that there are brief descriptions of what happens on stage, and the characters' names are clearly indicated on the left of the page.

- ▶ If you have been following this series, take the short story you wrote as part of the second set of activities: how to write... a short story. Then look at the first page and rewrite it in script format.
- ▶ If you haven't got a short story, try writing a dialogue from your notebook in the correct format.
- ▶ Alternatively, try finding a story you like – a Macmillan Reader perhaps - and re-write it in script format.

When you are writing in the correct format, remember these two things:

A - Stage directions

These are very simple instructions to the actor. They are usually written in brackets after the character's name. They describe exactly what the character does. For example:

[He wounds Hamlet with his poisoned sword]

[He pulls back the tapestry and sees Polonius]

Sometimes, stage directions tell the director or actors what is happening.

[There is a loud noise outside]

[The musicians play a tune]



Thinking creatively: how to write... a poem

Sometimes they say *how* a character does something...

Claudius: [*very surprised*]...

Ophelia: [*to herself*]...

Hamlet: [*laughing*]...

Perhaps most importantly, stage directions show who is onstage at any time. They do this by using the words 'Enter' and 'Exit.' Simply write [*Enter*] and the character's name when you bring someone onto the stage, and then [*Exit*] and the character's name when you want them to leave the stage.

B - Acts and Scenes

If you are writing a longer script, break the story into scenes and acts. This is a way of dividing up the story and thinking about how it is timed. Think of an act as being one chapter of a novel, or one episode of a TV series. A scene is one narrative unit, that is, one point which develops the story, and it happens in one place. Remember, there will be an audience for your play. Manage the time for each scene/act so the audience will stay engaged with the story.

There are usually between two and five scenes in each act, and up to five acts in a play – but this is not a rule!

Activity 3: Staging a Play

Once you have script, you are ready to put on your play! You don't need a theatre to do this – any room will do (actors call this a 'rehearsal space'). It isn't necessary for the actors to learn all their lines at first – after all, you might decide to change them in your second draft – so give each actor a copy of the script, and ask them to read out their parts. As they read, you will be able to see and hear which lines are good, and which need changing (perhaps because they are too long, or not necessary.) Make notes and use them to write your second, improved, draft.

Now is also the time to think about your stage set. This is the furniture that will be on the stage, the lighting you need, and the objects the characters will hold. These are called 'props.' You don't need these at early rehearsal stage – but start thinking about them now! Remember that some of the best plays use very simple scenes and very few props. There have been productions of Hamlet that use no props at all apart from wooden swords and a metal cup!

Rehearsing can take any amount of time from a few days to a few months. Here you need to manage your time carefully – find out when people are available, when you can use your rehearsal space, and when you can work on your own revising the script. Making a calendar – either on paper or on your phone or computer – can be a big help.

Remember and Follow up

- ▶ **Adapt:** As we said before, a play script offers the instructions for actors and the director. As you rehearse and practice, you can change what you have written. Some writers change the script right up until minutes before the first performance!
- ▶ **Watch theatre:** If there is a theatre where you live, go and see as many plays as you can. Even if you don't think they are good, you can learn from what you have seen.
- ▶ **Know your limits – and work with them:** You don't need lots of money to put on a play. The script and the actors are the most important 'things'. If they are good, then a big stage set and complicated lighting is not necessary.
- ▶ **Try acting out other plays:** Before you do your own play, practice! The Macmillan Shakespeare series is a good place to start. Get together with your class, pick a story you like and practice acting it out. You can learn a lot about writing, acting and timing by doing this.