ESSENTIAL PLAYWRITING GUIDELINES

Types of Plays

Plays come in all shapes and sizes. Here are the most common ones:

One-Act Plays

One-acts can run anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour or more. While technically, the one-act gets its name from having only one act (however long that might be); it's more commonly thought of as a play that isn't long enough to constitute a full evening. Arguably the most popular length for one-acts is around a half-hour. At this length, a play can fit on a bill with a pair of other one-acts. Thirty minutes is a good length for a competition play.

A good one-act focuses on one main action or problem; there's not enough time to get into complicated layers of plot. And for practical reasons, it's a good idea to keep your play to one set and as few scenes as possible. Why? Let's say that your one-act is on a bill with two other one-acts, a common scenario. Let's further say that your one-act has two distinct settings, requiring two different sets and a set change in the middle of an already short play. Not a good thing. Each of the other one-acts already has its own set requirements, so suddenly the theatre is faced with building four different sets for one evening. Not likely to happen.

Another common situation is that a one-act precedes a play that's not quite long enough to be an evening unto itself. Basically the best practice is to write your one-act with the most minimal set and technical demands possible.

Full-Length Plays

Full-length plays are also called evening-length plays, because they're long enough to be their own evening. How long is that? Anywhere from around seventy to eighty minutes and upwards. How up is up? These days, with TV shrinking our attention spans, you'd better have a very good reason to keep an audience in the theatre for much longer than two hours. And it's *always* a good idea to write your play so that it can be produced, if necessary, with minimal set and technical requirements. This doesn't mean that an ambitious designer can't go to town on your script if that possibility exists, but if producing your play requires eight set changes or filling the stage with water, most theatres will not be able to afford you.

Musicals

Musicals can run the gamut in length from ten minutes (though these are rare, because it's not very cost effective to assemble a band to play for only ten minutes) to three hours. Again, the middle ground - somewhere between ninety minutes and two hours, is probably the one to shoot for.

Different Theatre Spaces

Not every theatre space is the same, and it pays to be aware of the types of spaces in which your play might be produced. Often, plays work better in some spaces than others. Keeping in mind that many theatre spaces are hybrids, here are the basics:

Proscenium

Effectively, the actors perform with the audience sitting in front of them. Either the stage is raised above the level of the audience or the seats in the "house" are raked (in other words, the farther away from the stage your seat is, the higher up you get). Most theatres - everything from Broadway to the Cork Arts Theatre- are prosceniums.

Thrust

Imagine a tongue thrusting into a proscenium-style audience and you have a thrust configuration. In this configuration, though this may not be true of the extreme upstage area, the actors will have audience on three sides.

In the Round

The actors are in a central playing area, and the audience surrounds them on all sides. Actors may have to enter and exit through the aisles.

Black Box

A black box is a performance space that is exactly what it sounds like: a black-painted square or rectangle. A true black box - that is, one with no fixed seating - is the ultimate in flexibility, because the theatre can configure the audience arrangement to match the staging needs of your play, rather than staging your play around the audience.

Touring

A "touring" space isn't a kind of space at all, but if your show needs to tour - (e.g. to schools) that means it could be performed in anything from a giant proscenium auditorium to a densely packed classroom - it's a good idea to observe some common sense guidelines:

- No sets or sets that can be installed and taken down in minutes, and transported in a deep trunk or a van.
- Props and costumes that can be packed into a large box for easy transport.
- No lighting cues beyond "lights up" (if that), and only sound cues that can be done from a portable stereo.
- Small cast (anything larger than four is begging for trouble).
- Forty to forty-five minutes running time (for secondary schools, and fewer for younger children), to fit into one class period.

Story Structure

Scenes or Acts?

Should you divide your play into acts, or just into scenes? It's really a matter of personal taste, as long as you recognize a few basic principles of play construction and why we have these divisions in the first place.

Virtually all plays, divide into what has come to be called three-act structure.

- The first act is the **Protasis,** or exposition.
- The second act is the **Epitasis,** or complication.
- The final act is the **Catastrophe,** or resolution.

Just as in screenwriting format, the middle act is the longest.

So what does this three-act structure mean? It means that no matter whether you label the divisions in your script acts or scenes, the arc of a good play will be roughly the same. Logically, though, if you're writing a play that is not meant to have an interval, it makes sense simply to have scenes, whereas if you expect to have an interval, put it between two acts. Of course, you could also put an interval between scenes if you prefer. You have options. You even have options when it comes to structure.

Write to be Read

One of the terms you'll hear a lot is "your reader." But plays are meant to be performed, not read - right? True, but before your play makes it to a stage, it will have to survive a small army of readers, so it's crucial that you write not just to be performed, but to be read as well.

Story Development

Writing off the top of our head sometimes is great to capture a fleeting idea. But real planning and preparation work can save you a lot of frustration and backpedalling at a later date. Outlining and breaking down the dramatic elements of a story are well worth the effort. By playing contrasts and conflict to maximum effect the playwright can stir the primal in us.

There are so many ways to approach an idea. And the actual activity of logging in the possibilities is not a pleasant task. But having an easy and systematic method to catalogue ideas, dialogue, and other snippets is like having an assistant available at all time to do your bidding. In recent years software developers have created products to simplify this process; some are for outlining/brainstorming and others specifically organize dramatic elements under a theoretical umbrella. Whatever method you choose here is a "Top Ten Tip' List for you:

1. Create a world that's true to real life or fantastical or that mixes the mundane with the magical. But whatever set of rules you create for that world, make sure you follow them.

2. Write a conflict that builds as the play progresses. As you structure the conflict, think in terms of your play having a beginning, middle and an end.

3. Write characters that want something (which puts them in conflict with other characters) and try to get what they want at every moment. Well formed characters lead the plot rather than the other way around. Without characters that the audience care about and have an emotional connection to, despite the fact you may have the most amazing idea or plots or set by the end of the play your audience will be left devoid of any feeling for the play.

4. Make sure that each character has something at stake, a consequence if he doesn't get what he wants.

5. Create a "ticking clock" that puts the characters under pressure to get what they want right away.

6. Make sure there is a good reason, an "event," for your play. It's not enough for two characters to sit around and talk for a while and then leave. There needs to be some important reason why we're watching them now, at this particular moment.

7. Write dialogue that illuminates your characters and advances the plot at the same time.

8. Make each character speak in a distinctive voice. If you have trouble with that, try imagining a specific actor you know - even if it's someone who will never play the part - in the role.

9. Do *not* have a character tell us something she can show us instead. For example, it's much more effective to hide under the bed than to say "I'm afraid."

10. Give each character a "moment," something that justifies the character's existence in your play and that makes him attractive for an actor to play.

What Does a Play Look Like?

Not Like This!

You may have seen plays that look something like this:

```
  ALEX. I want somewhere with a lawn.
  MERC. What? That patch of dead grass on 133rd not good enough? (Merc eyes
the lock on the box of women's clothing.) Wish I had a lawn. I would've been
a different person. (Beat.) Make sure you get a lawn. (Beat.) You been
through your Mom's clothing?
  ALEX. (Lying) No. You?
```

Notice that character name, dialogue and intermittent (stage directions) extend from left margin to right margin, except for a small indent of the first line. Text is single-spaced.

This is **Published Play Format**, typically what the publisher gives you in an Acting Edition, and its goal is to save space. It's hard to read, and not submission format. Submitting a script in this format is a bad idea - it would surely give any theatre's overworked staff a headache.

What Should My Play Look Like?

Playwrights and the people who read their work have never adopted an ironclad, industry-wide format, maybe because theatre, by its nature, tends toward the revolutionary and can't bear to become establishment. Maybe we're just not that organized.

But even if there's not one, absolutely must-follow format, there are definitely common-sense formatting principles of "readability" that must be respected. If a work is going to be read by potentially many people you must place the words on the page in the most familiar manner. This will assure the reader that an experienced writer is behind the work and that same writer will not burden the reader with unusual markings, fonts, or margins. Here is a general rendering of Manuscript Format.

Note: Script formatting software has made formatting all scripts considerably easier and less time-intensive in recent years, and many of these same programs have playwriting templates, with settings that you can modify with relative ease. They're definitely worth investing in and more on those later.

Manuscript Format

The Rules: Manuscript format is the *only* structure to use when you are submitting your script to theatre companies, contests, publishers, agents and other theatre opportunities. The guiding principle here is easy reading.

- Title Page
- Cast Page
- Musical Numbers Page (musicals only)
- Act/Scene Heading
- Setting Description
- Character Name
- Dialogue
- Stage Directions (in brackets)
- Transition

No particular font, like the Courier 12 point in screenwriting, is the rule. I prefer Times Roman for its ease of reading, but Courier or any other simple, clear font is acceptable. Cursive fonts or handwritten corrections are not acceptable. Whichever font you choose, though, keep the size at 12 points for reading ease.

Page Layout

The Rules:

- Use one sided A4 paper
- Top and bottom margins are about 1".
- Right margin is also 1". Left margin, where the binding is, is approximately 1.5".
- Page numbering is essential and starts on page 2, place a page number in the upper right hand corner (in the header).

- Do not number the Cast Page.
- All text must be printed in black ink.

Title Page

The Rules: Vertically centered on the page, type the play's title in all Caps centered directly below type your name in mixed case.

Keep your title page simple - no oversized letters, colour or fancy graphics.
Your address, phone number, email address follows. Print it right justified (in the right half of the page) and as close to the bottom margin as you can get without wrapping onto the next page (or your agent's contact information, if you have representation).

Should you put the draft number or the date on your script? I would argue "yes" to the draft number and "no" to the date. The draft number helps the theatre tell one draft from another should they request a rewrite. Printing a date on a script, while technically serving as distinguishing, has the negative impact of dating your work.

The Rules: Don't ever send out a First Draft!

What about a Copyright Notice?

Copyright notices are placed either below the address field on the right, or left aligned on the first line of the address block.

There are two schools of thought on whether to put a copyright notice on the title page. One argument is that it may deter would-be thieves from "borrowing" your work and shows that you know your rights. The opposite argument is that it's a sign of paranoia or amateurism.

Your script is copyrighted from the instant you write it, even though to receive statutory protection it needs to be registered; therefore including the copyright notice is redundant.
Here's what a complete title page might look like:

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                    Macbeth
              William Shakespeare
```

```
                              Address line 1
                              Address line 2
                                       Town
                                     County
                                    Country
                     Tel +353 (0)21 4505624

                     E-mail writer@gmail.com

                                  Draft 2.3
```

Cast Page

Use the standard page margin, without page number. Capitalizing the character names helps set them apart - you may even wish to write them in bold. If the character description wraps onto a second line, use a hanging indent.

The Rules: This is the readers' and potential producer or director's reference page.

- Detail your characters' age, gender and anything else that is essential to casting.
- If necessary include a little spin on "who" your characters are.
- Include whether one actor is meant to play multiple characters (referred to as Multiple Casting).
- *Do not* write exhaustive descriptions of the characters' behaviour; you have to show this in the play.

Here you can also include any setting information, whether there's an interval in your play, or no obvious act break. Here's a sample Cast Page.

```
                    Cast of Characters

JACK CLITHEROE (a bricklayer, Commandant in the Irish Army
NORA CLITHEROE, his wife
PETER FLYNN (a labourer), Nora's Uncle
THE YOUNG COVEY (a fitter), Clitheroe's cousin
BESSIE BURGESS (a street fruit-vendor)
MRS. GROGAN (a charwoman)
MOLLSER, her consumptive child

Act One – The living room of the Clitheroe flat in a Dublin tenement
Act Two – A public house, outside of which a meeting is being held.
Act Three – The street outside the Clitheroe tenement.
```

'Musical' Numbers Page

The Rules: In a musical, include the Musical Numbers Page after the Cast Page. The exact format varies, but think two columns: in the left column list the titles of the songs, and the right column, left indented approximately 3", list the performing characters. Divide the show into acts.

Act/Scene Heading

Typically, Act/Scene Headings are very simple. Act numbers are traditionally written in Roman numerals, while Scene numbers are written as Arabic numbers. Text of both Act and Scene are written in all CAPS and centered on the line. In the past playwrights used to underline these headings, but boldface type stands out better.

The Rules: If you're writing a ten-minute or one-act play with only one scene, you don't need to use Act/Scene headings. But if you're writing a one-act play with multiple scenes or a multi-act play, you need to give your reader some road signs.

Look at it below:

```
                    ACT I

                   SCENE 1
```

If a play is a one-act, cut the Act Heading (obviously) and just use the Scene Heading. Now, you're ready for the...

Setting Description

Typically, the Setting description is left indented approximately half way across the page, running to the right margin.

The Rules: When your play, or any new scene or act, begins, the reader wants to know the Setting and who and what is seen on stage. In America this is known as the At Rise Description, so named because it refers to the raising of the curtain most theatres used to have. While these days curtains are mostly reserved for large, proscenium houses, such as on Broadway, we still need to know what the stage looks like when the lights come up. Older formats would often call for the Setting and the At Rise Description to be separated, but these days we tend to put them together.

```
        A kitchen/living room somewhere in Cork. Early evening. MARGE,
        thirty something mother, stops to examine the carton before
        pouring milk into a bowl of flour. On the table are four place
        settings, one of which includes a martini.
```

From the above description, your reader knows the setting (place and time) of the play, as well as who and what occupies the space when the play begins.

Use the same margins each time a new scene or new act begins. Since the whole idea of starting a new scene is that either the place or time has changed - otherwise, you'd still be in the same scene - it's common sense to set the new scene for your reader with a setting description, do not however attempt to design the set and costumes with this description – that is the designers job!

The Stage

Notice the use of the terms "right" and "centre," which along with "left" are theatrical shorthand for Stage Right, Stage Left and Centre Stage. Right and left always refer to the actors' right and left, and centre is the centre of the stage. Sometimes you'll also see "upstage" or "downstage," or their shorter forms, *up and *down. The latter terms get their names from the early days of theatre, when stages were raked, and if you walked toward the back of the stage, you literally walked up, and if you walked toward the audience, you were walking down. Few raked stages exist, but we still use the terms.

Character Name

Characters' names may appear in two ways: before dialogue and contained in the stage directions. Character names that precede dialogue are *always* capitalised & placed flush left, followed by a colon or semicolon. Putting the name in boldface is a popular option, which increases readability. (In the US, as in screenplays, the name is capitalised and centred in the line above the dialogue)

```
PERRY: They were your dogs. And Rover just ran away. We don't even know for
sure he's dead.

MARLA: It's been two years.
```

For character names that appear in the stage directions you have the choice of two formats. The first format is like screenwriting: the character name is in all CAPS the first time it is introduced in the stage directions, after that it's always in mixed case.

The second way to format character names in stage directions is to use ALL CAPS throughout. It's a matter of personal preference: pick the format that seems most readable and stick with it.

Dialogue

Writing good dialogue is hard, but formatting it is easy. Dialogue, which is always mixed case, single-spaced, typically runs margin to margin and follows on the same line as the character name, left-indented approximately 1.5-2" or generously enough for there to be sufficient white space for easy readability. A blank line follows between the dialogue and the next character's name. A formatting program will do the spacing and margin adjusting automatically for you.

```
COWGIRL:        The hamburger is ten feet tall.

COWBOY:         It's not there.

COWGIRL:        I know, but it's dripping fat, and it's sizzling. It's on a
sesame bun, and you can just see some onion sticking out. There's a dab of
ketchup on the onion. Maybe it popped out from under the bun. It's winking at
me.
```

Sometimes stage directions interrupt dialogue, but each adheres to its own formatting rules. See below.

```
COWGIRL: Piece in your teeth. (She puts the finger with the fragment of the
meat into her mouth. She instantly spits it out.) Ugh! Why'd you tell me it
was beef?
```

Continuing Dialogue

If a character's dialogue is interrupted by a page break, and continues onto the next page, you repeat the character name set-up on the next page with the (cont'd) remark after the name. This is what formatting software was made for!

```
LADY SHAKESPEARE:        And he fed the dog! Yeah, the dog ... I don't know ...
No ... That population's on the ups every day, and we're gonna' get buried in
garbage else ... That's why he's feedin' the dog ...
```

At the top of the next page:

```
LADY SHAKESPEARE (cont'd):     Don't tell me different. No, no, no ...(She
sees Ben.) There's little trash babies, all kinds, eatin' their lunch out of
a garbage pail. I just know the Trash Man's comin'. Who thrown their babies
to the garbage?
```

Offstage Dialogue

When a character walks offstage while speaking either notate this as part of the stage directions, or alongside the character name if the character is already offstage. You may write either "Offstage" or "Off."

```
BAXTER:        Yeah. Sure. (Baxter exits stage left. Offstage) We mostly talk
sports when he calls, 'cause he's into that. Talk a little wrestling, a
little football - he's a linebacker. Not a real good team - I snuck over to
see a game once. They're small. Josh is real fast. If they had some other
real fast kids they might be good. But now football's almost over and it's
time for wrestling.
```

...or...

```
HOLLY (off):   You still have to bandage it.
```

Interruptions

When one character interrupts another, use double dashes (--) or an em dash (a long dash) to show that the speaker is being cut off. Below, I make use of an em dash. No need to write "interrupts."

```
HUGO:          If my Dad said we're moving just like that -

CHARLIE:       You'd move. Hold this cone (holds out the ice cream cone) a
sec?
```

Using ellipses (...) does not signify that a character has been interrupted, but rather that she hesitates or trails off of her own accord. For example, in *Shining Sea*, Pac can't bring himself to ask a question:

```
PAC:    Would you ... ?

CANDY:  Would I what?
```

Emphasizing Dialogue

Occasionally, the actor's emphasis on a particular word may be so important that you want to write that direction into the script. While there is no ironclad rule for this practice, making the word to be emphasized bold or underlining it works best (using italics or capitalizing the word is both confusing and cramping). Below is an example:

WENDY: You do? But she's <u>my</u> hallucination.

Simultaneous Dialogue

Sometimes characters speak at the same time. Below is an example of how to format this eventuality.

SARAH: And what do you say?

BEN / BILL (TOGETHER): *(Sheepishly)*   Thanks mum!

Writing Tip: Make sure to punctuate *very* carefully. Through careful punctuation, and not by giving them line readings, is how you tell the director and the actor how your characters speak. A comma means something different than a period. Ellipses mean something different than an em dash. A period and a question mark make big differences in an actor's inflection. Control the rhythm of your play through the punctuation.

Stage Direction

Stage directions should sit on their own line, italicized and left-indented approximately .5-1".

Directions to the actors (for example, "excitedly") are placed within dialogue, contained in parentheses and italicized.

A blank line follows all dialogue or stage direction.

The Rules: Do not try to direct the play from the page by telling us what the character should be feeling or by giving abundant line readings.

Some writers like to write stage directions in complete sentences, while others prefer phrases. Punctuate accordingly. Whatever you do, use the active present tense.

Do not overload the script with stage directions. The best practice is to only include stage directions which are absolutely essential for the plot development. An overabundance of stage directions in any script is nowadays perceived as unprofessional. Detailed notes about set design and lighting requirements will often be ignored. It is the director's job to direct and the designer's job to design. Similarly, actors object to detailed notes in the script, indicating how their lines should be delivered (emotional stage directions).

Transition

Since curtains are so rarely used, lighting has become the chief means of indicating the beginning and end of your play. Typically, "Lights up" is understood as the direction at the opening of any scene, so it's rarely written. However, a lights out direction usually *does* appear at the *end* of a scene or an act or the play. Among the common terms are "Lights fade" and "Blackout."

MERC: I know. (*He pats Alex on the back and looks out the window. Beat)* There's somebody under the window.

   Alex joins him at the window as they look down. Blackout.

If it's the end of an act, it's a good idea to indicate that too.

BRUCE: For?

MARGE: Rufus.

   Blackout and end of Act I.

And then there's the end of the play. Here's the ending of *War of the Buttons*:

WALKER: *(Beat. Exited)*   Good war.

CHARLIE: Yeah. You too.

   Walker exits. Beat. Charlie bites into the cone, then exits as the lights dim. End of play.

Instead of "End of play," you may wish to cling to tradition and write "Curtain."

Page Break Rules

- Do not break dialogue or stage directions in mid-sentence.
- Do not page break between a character name and the dialogue that follows.
- See Continuing Dialogue for instructions about how to break in the middle of a character's dialogue.
-

Binding

Unlike in America (where the rules state you should three-hole punch your play using brads in the top and bottom holes, leaving the middle hole empty) there are no hard and fast rules to binding your play in the UK & Ireland so unless a theatre has specific guidelines, just ensure the script is secured in such a way that pages can be turned easily.

For very short plays, a secure staple in the upper-left corner is usually sufficient unless the theatre tells you otherwise. Do *not* paperclip scripts unless directed to do so by the theatre.

Submitting Your Work

The Rules: Understand that large cast shows are very expensive, often prohibitively so, for professional theatres to produce. Youth Theatres & amateur community groups, on the other hand, often need large cast shows to involve lots of members. Typically shows with lots of female roles will be particularly welcome!.

The Rules: Before submitting your script to a theatre company, be aware of a few facts:

- All theatres & production companies are inundated with scripts and understaffed.
- Different theatres want you to approach them - or not approach them - in different ways.
- Not every theatre will be the right place to send your newly-minted masterpiece.
- If a theatre wants a certain type of play (for example, they only produce one-acts), that's what they want. Don't send them anything else.
- Response times vary from a few weeks to more than a year. Be patient and move on to writing something else rather than sitting on your hands.
- Most scripts have to be rejected - often for reasons that have nothing to do with the quality of your play - because theatres receive many more scripts than they can produce. It's *not* personal.

Submissions to theatres follow one of the following five paths:

Direct Solicitation

Don't call them. They'll call you.

Agent Submission

You don't send it - your agent does. Don't have an agent? Some theatres that request Agent Submissions only may respond to a well-written query or to a writer with a professional recommendation, but there's no guarantee.

Professional Recommendation

Have a theatre professional - typically an artistic director or a literary manager or someone familiar to the company - draft a brief letter recommending the script. Send that with the script and your cover letter.

Query

Send a one-page letter briefly telling them about the play, its history (productions, readings, workshops), any unusual technical requirements, and a little bit about your experience. You may be asked to submit a one page synopsis and/or sample pages. When in doubt, submit a ten-page - no more - dialogue sample. Always include a stamped self-addressed envelope for their reply.

Unsolicited

Just send them the script with a brief cover letter (see Query). Some theatres that take unsolicited scripts don't want to be queried; others leave it as an option. Always include a stamped, self-addressed envelope (SASE) for the theatre's reply.

If a theatre accepts query letters and unsolicited scripts, the query letter is a good money-saver if you're not sure that a theatre is really right for your work.

The Rules: *Never* send out the only copy of your script. And make back-ups of your computer files regularly.

How do you find out what theatres want? A good starting place is Writers & Artists yearbook.
The Rules: Proofread your script for typographical and other errors, and remember that a spell-check program doesn't catch everything. Another set of eyes or reading the script aloud really helps.

Conclusion

As a writer just starting out, it's best to keep ideas like the need for conflict and the three-act structure in mind. In fact, beginners should probably stop reading here. But if you feel you've mastered the basics and are ready for a curveball, read on. Playwriting, more so than screenwriting, has always been a home for writers with unique ways of telling a story, or for writers who don't tell a story at all-on purpose.

For example, think of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, one of the greatest plays ever written. What's the conflict? There really isn't one. There's barely a story: it's just two guys waiting for a third man that never shows up. And by the end, nothing has happened. For the audience, the fun of the play is listening to the back and forth between Vladimir and Estragon as we slowly fill in the landscape of the world in which they live. This "landscape" structure works as an alternative to the more conventional conflict-crisis-resolution structure.

Some plays use a technique called "gapping" instead of lots of onstage conflict and plot. The scenes are episodes, and between each episode, time has passed, and things have changed. What happens during the scene, again, is that we as the audience fill in what these changes have been.

Or your play can be a "process" structured around some event. For example, two people wait for a bus. When the bus arrives, the play ends. Or maybe the play is a collection of characters, each following a story that happens at the same time as the others but seems disparate. In the end, all of these stories meet and add up to one. Examples of this more "anecdotal" structure can be found in the work of the great Russian playwright Chekhov.

Does this mean that conflict and the three-act structure are dead? That we should throw out everything we thought we knew about playwriting? Of course not. But remember that there are only a limited number of plots out there (some people say seven, others fourteen, and others thirty-six). Look at Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*, in terms of its plot, is just a tale of forbidden love. What makes it great is the rich, often beautiful dialogue that Shakespeare creates, the wonderful moments between the characters, the variety of textures and moods in the scenes. That's what we remember-not what a clever story he wrote or how much conflict there was.

So what, practically speaking, is the best place to start? To know what really makes a play memorable to an audience? First of all, as in all things, you must know your medium: the theatre. If you are a constant movie watcher, don't write plays. Even the largest stage cannot accommodate car chases and explosions. And, for Heaven's sake, actually go see plays!

Key Critiquing Themes & Evaluation Questions

Characters

Do the people seem real? What has been done to make them come alive? If the characters appear shallow, what might be done to more fully develop a character? Did every character have a need and an objective?

Plots

Was the main plot clear and believable? Was the plot driven by the characters and the conflicts which hampered them from achieving their objective? Were there too many subplots? Was the unfolding of the plot easy to follow or was I lost at any stage. Did it end where it should? Did the plot/subplots move fast enough to keep my attention? Can it be tightened?

Conversation

Did the dialogue flow naturally? Was there any redundant dialogue (dialogue that didn't contribute towards the development of character or plot Static dialogue is no better than empty space. Speech that neither defines character nor moves plot can be deleted.)? Were there traits in the language specific to each character and did it help develop their unique personalities? If dialects were used were they accurate?

Stage Directions

Was there any stage directions that was redundant as far as the plot was concerned. Was there inappropriate direction, design or emotive notes contained within the stage direction? Was the stage direction clear and correctly formatted?

Continuity

When I finished reading, were there loose ends that were left unresolved? Was there anything that needed further explanation? Were there any inconsistencies? Did the writer intrude himself into the story?

Techniques

Was the English readable? Was it formatted correctly? Were there typos, grammatical errors, misuse of punctuation, run-on sentences, or any other errors that need correction?

TIPS FOR GOOD PLAYWRITING

KNOW YOUR MEDIUM

So, what is it that makes a great play great? According to Aristotle, there are six main elements that go into making a good drama, character, plot, ideas, language, music & spectacle. Ignoring the last two elements which are the domain of the director & designer, all of these areas must work in order to create a good script.

But when we sit down with 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 viable piece of work? While ultimately, this is subjective, there are many ways to approach writing a play which will facilitate finding out whether or not you achieved your goal of writing a great play.

First of all, as in all things, you must know your medium: the theatre. If you are a constant movie watcher, don't write plays. Even the largest stage cannot accommodate car chases and explosions.

To write truly effective theatre, you must immerse yourself in the medium. Start by reading and watching quality scripts and plays. Published plays have been through the whole process of writing, re-writing and editing. At least in theory, they have worked out most of the bugs toward having a quality script (some published scripts, admittedly, fall short). Reading acting editions of published scripts can help a lot. You can find scripts at most public libraries.

THE LOGISTICS

In playwriting, less truly is more. Be conscious of the cost of mounting a production. It usually follows the more characters you write into a play, the more actors you need to play them. A script with more than six actors may seem prohibitive to a Theatre company.

You will want to limit your settings as well. Think of some of the best plays of all time: *Death of a Salesman*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? All of these plays take place in a single setting: one room, or one unchanging collection of rooms.

Keep in mind the unities of Time, Place and Action. While theatrical aesthetics may change over time, you will find that people still love a play that begins at the beginning and proceeds in a linear fashion through to the end. Writing multiple scene changes, 10-year gaps in time and action will alienate your audience; they want to get to know and care about your characters. You only have a couple of hours. Don't waste them by alienating your audience with flashbacks, large time gaps, and other devices that are better suited to film or novels.

DEVELOPING CHARACTERS

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. Once you've decided what the character's objective is, make sure everything they do or say is a tactic to achieve that objective. Furthermore, in addition to each character's overall objective for the play, if they are in multiple scenes, they also need to have an objective for each scene. Finally, each character should have another character whose objective is in direct conflict with theirs. For instance, the two characters in one scene are Sam and Alex. Sam needs to leave the room. Alex needs Sam to stay in the room.

Notice that at least one character will NOT achieve their objective...one will succeed, one will fail.
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 in essence creating a life. Just as you would with your own children, 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.

In order to develop a character with a mind and a distinctive sense of self, you must know all there is to know about her/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 behaviour 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. You may need to write a character that is agoraphobic, while you intensely enjoy the outdoors and the company of others. 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. Don't be afraid of giving your characters a flaw, or even two. After all I'm sure Jesus passed wind on occasion. Likewise no character is devoid of positive traits, even Hitler loved his Mother.

Finally, never forget the effectiveness of action. Have a look at William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker*, the story of Helen Keller. There is a very long 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.

WRITING DIALOGUE

No matter how tightly plotted a play is, it will always be undermined by poor dialogue. Strangely, many writers are apt to forget that dialogue is written to be spoken. It is often useful to read your work aloud, especially if you are new to writing. If the line is difficult to read, re-write it. Try not to produce interchangeable dialogue. Each character should have their own distinctive voice, tone, rhythm and thought process (spoken & unspoken). Check back through the play. How easy is it to distinguish between characters?

Although transcribing everyday conversations doesn't typically make good drama, as in real life, we use extra words, sentences and paragraphs that don't really contribute to the conversation and plays must be more "economical" with their words, it is still a useful exercise to listen in on everyday conversations and take notes on how people in real life actually speak to each other, it is amazing how different it can be to the written word.

PLOTS

You now 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. In Tennessee Williams' short play *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.

Remember that the action of the play should be shown, not told. In other words, avoid the use of a narrator at ALL costs. "But what about *Our Town*? Very successful play, and it has a narrator." My response: learn why the rules exist before you try to break them. By using action and dialogue to show the action (even the PRIOR ACTION) it makes the action MUCH more interesting to the audience.

TECHNICAL TIPS

Correct format and appropriate stage directions are essential if you want your play to be read and taken seriously by any Theatre.

AND FINALLY

Don't expect your first draft to be your final draft. Even professional playwrights go through several re-writes before they submit their play to a publisher. Have a group (preferably people who haven't read your script before) read your script out loud... things that don't read the way you hoped will start jumping off the page.

Double and triple check for spelling and grammatical errors. Grammatical errors that are a result of how the character speaks are okay as long as they are consistent. Stage directions should always use proper grammar. If time allows, try putting the script away for a week or two and then read it again... some mistakes will become obvious to you when you pick it back up.

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.