

# Playwriting



Level 9

## Introduction

This is a fun project—you get to write a play. A play is the ultimate “show, don’t tell” genre. It is primarily meant to be seen and heard, not read, so you cannot use third-person narration or description. You have only the words and actions of your characters to move your plot along and reveal the personalities of your characters. As you are planning, think of a way that your play can be performed, even in a very limited setting.

If you are short on time, consider writing only one detailed scene of a play. Discuss this with your teacher, however, before you start to write.

In any production of a play, you will need to concern yourself with aspects of production.

- \* If you perform live, you will need actors, direction, costumes, props, and rehearsal time.
- \* If you pre-record a radio play, you will need rehearsal time, various voice-only actors, and recording time and equipment.<sup>1</sup>
- \* Consider the treasures to be found at your local thrift store. Costumes galore await you at bargain prices in these fine establishments!
- \* Consider employing mime when staging plays. An actor can indicate any prop—from a drinking glass to a whole kitchen or an entire restaurant—using posture, gestures, and attitudes.

## Prewriting

You may have previous experience with this phase of playwriting from earlier years. If so, follow the steps below independently. If, on the other hand, you are a student who is new to this genre, work through these steps with your teacher.

- \* Start by talking about the ways that people reveal what they are thinking through what they say or do. Go to a mirror and portray:
  - A person who is in a hurry
  - A person who is tired
  - A person who is worried
- \* Note the things you did. Now, represent the same characteristics using only words. What *words* could convey the emotions above without actually *telling* the reader that you are hurried, tired, or worried? Keep practicing until you have the idea of “show, don’t tell.”
- \* Next, talk with your teacher about the scope of the assignment.
  - You may not have sufficient time to write and produce a full-length skit to be acted out (or recorded in Year 4).
  - On the other hand, you may have a co-op group with which you are collaborating so that your part in the process is manageable.
  - Go over your *Tapestry* writing assignment charts with your teacher so you know the weekly goals for this multi-week process.
- \* After you’ve defined the scope of the project, review the format of a typical script.
  - Look at any play you may have in print in your home, such as a volume of Shakespeare. (Note, though, that Shakespeare and ancient Greek plays are written in poetry formats; you will write in prose.)
  - Note that, usually, the character’s name is written at the left, and all his lines follow. Different actors’ lines are separated on the page with spaces.
  - Note that you will only put minimal direction in the script for actors’ movements or ges-

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<sup>1</sup> An additional challenge with radio plays is sound effects. You can make many sound effects from things around your house. Pay attention to details! For instance, the sound of someone walking up to a door can be created by taking shoes and “walking” them across a table top or floor. The sound of fire is simulated by crackling cellophane near a microphone. You may be able to make a great many sound effects with your mouth, too!



tures. Playwrights will occasionally put in a word or phrase of direction (in parentheses), but mostly, the writer writes dialogue that actors and directors interpret and bring to life.

- \* Now it's time to work out the general plot of the scene (or play).
  - Use our standard Story Map (Dialectic/Rhetoric) supplement.
  - Think out a plot that has a good beginning, interesting middle, and sense of ending, and, if you are so inclined, one that has a historical setting.
  - Remember that the whole plot is told by what actors say and do, so the story needs to be one that can be acted out by at least two actors. As with short story writing, pare down the plot to a central idea and just a few characters whom the audience will get to know well.
- \* You should also use the Characterization Grid supplement.
  - Think about the way people talked, acted, and believed in the historical setting. (It may be helpful to use either the Internet or younger siblings' printed resources to remind yourself of costumes and settings pertinent to your play).
  - Before you begin drafting your play, fill out one Characterization Grid for each character you plan to have on stage.

### Drafting

Put your first ideas down on paper. For some students, writing the plot of the scene or play as prose and then shifting it to spoken lines may be easier, but again, remember that you can't put description or direction into the script. It's all "show, don't tell!"

If you get stuck, "talk it out." You can be first one actor and then another, pacing your room and gesticulating as you work to get the lines down on paper.

### Editing

Probably the best way for students at all levels to edit their plays is to hear them read by actors.

- \* For this, siblings can be employed—and surely Dad would like to get into the act (literally)!
- \* The actors don't need to move at all; rather, employ a technique called "bench reading," where everyone has a part (or two) and reads them aloud, putting intonation into the voice but not making any other movements.
- \* You, the playwright, should listen to this bench reading with a script in hand and make notes on how it could be improved.

### Polishing and Presenting

If you are going to produce this play, it *will* be polished as you work out the myriad of details and questions that will arise as actors attempt to deliver the lines. Above all, have fun! This assignment really is homeschooling at its best.