

## How to Write a Play: A Crash Course for Students and Drama Groups

By Aubrey Hampton

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If you are reading this, you've probably decided to write a play and I'm determined to help you do just that. "The play's the thing," said Hamlet in Shakespeare's famous drama of the same name. In Shakespeare's day, there were not many other alternatives to theater—no movies, radio, television nor much access to printed books—so this statement was, quite literally, true. Then and now, plays have the power to move audiences, perhaps more profoundly than any other medium. In my lifetime I've seen plays move an audience to tears, and I've been deeply moved myself, so I know Hamlet's words still apply.

Before we get down to work, it may be helpful to understand a little bit about how plays have evolved since Shakespeare's time. Poetry, which had been the dominant language of high drama, slowly gave way to prose dialogue; a more colloquial writing became the norm. Playwrights also began to introduce detailed stage directions in their works in order to authenticate the background and behavior of their characters.

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, two important movements in theater—realism and its more militant offshoot, naturalism—had burst onto the scene. Rebelling against the histrionics and larger-than-life artifice of traditional drama up to that point, champions of realism such as Henrik Ibsen and Bernard Shaw struggled to create more lifelike dialogue and situations. Realist playwrights were the first to present and explore psychological complexities in their characters, and the first to set their plays in familiar, contemporary backgrounds rather than in the context of history or myth that had been Shakespeare's terrain.

By the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, figures such as Strindberg—and later, Eugene O'Neill—showed us that what a character "thinks" is as important to the play as the lines he/she speaks on stage. As Freud himself pointed out, artists had discovered the unconscious long before clinicians—himself included—had found a place for it in their case reports.

The playwrights who called themselves "naturalists" were actually determinists—that is, they believed people (and thus the characters in their plays) behave as they do based on heredity, and instincts often overpower any scruples or morals. Naturalism, an extreme form of realism exemplified by French novelist-turned-playwright Emile Zola and the early plays of Strindberg, grew out of the desire to make drama even more down-to-earth. These plays mirrored life with a directness, sometimes bordering on crudeness. Not everyone liked a theatre devoted to the prose of life, but that is what we got from the realists and the naturalists.

An outgrowth of the naturalist movement was the modern social dramatist, who believed men and women were determined by the society. The romantic playwrights had already introduced "local" color into the play, but the social dramatists went one step further and introduced the social effects of environment—our surroundings. The environment became not only the background for the play but the foreground as well.

Set outside a New York City tenement, Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* became the social drama of the decade when it was finally produced in 1929. The play deals with the people who live in that tenement and how they are affected by their environment (and their heredity as well), and was highly controversial for the times. Initially, *Street Scene* was refused by many producers and directors, including the famous George Cukor, who walked out in the middle of casting. When it finally opened in New York, it ran for over 600 performances and went on to win that year's Pulitzer Prize.

I strongly recommend you read some of these important plays and playwrights and familiarize yourself with their groundbreaking work. You are likely to find reading great plays will inspire you in your own writing and help you uncover your own artistic voice. Meanwhile, here are some useful tips to help you get started.

### **The Atmosphere of Your Play**

“The pawn is the soul of the game,” said Dostoevsky in his assessment of chess. It can also be said that atmosphere is the soul of the play. While there are many styles of theater—satire, farce, tragedy, drama, etc.—it is the atmosphere of a play that makes its style recognizable. Thus tragedy has one kind of atmosphere, and drama another. While romantic comedies can be satire or farce, their atmosphere is “romantic” in nature.

Atmosphere is the “feel” of a play. It determines how the actors will play their parts and how the director will direct them, and will strongly affect the “look” scenic, costume, and lighting designers give the play on stage.

Atmosphere is extremely important to the success of your play. It is also a great starting point. Before I begin the actual writing, I first try to visualize the setting. I try to imagine what the characters might look like, what stage props will be useful, how the different scenes should be lit, and even the background music (if there is any). This is all part of the play’s atmosphere.

When I wrote my one-act play *Thick As Thieves*, I began by visualizing my characters and their surroundings to get a “feel” for who they were. I saw them as low-class thugs living in a rundown trailer park. Slowly, I began adding details to the images in my head. These characters had a “wolf dog” that howled all the time. In my mind I could hear it just outside their shabby trailer door. I envisioned their friends—all criminal types with simple tastes and little education. All of these elements helped me create a certain atmosphere that would eventually help the actors flesh out the characters. When the actor cast to play Tony—one of the leads—tries to get a handle on his character, atmosphere will help him understand what Tony is like: how he moves, how he talks, etc.

You can’t have two atmospheres at one time in a play, but you can have two characters coexisting in one atmosphere. The actors will move and talk within this atmosphere, which becomes as vital to the play as the characters themselves. Atmosphere is the soul of an actor’s performance; it deepens the perception of the audience and helps the actor bring his character to life.

### **Characterization and Dialogue**

If atmosphere is the soul of the play, the characters are the body of the play. It is true that you can’t have a play without characters, even if you have only one character talking to himself on a tape recording, as in Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*.

A playwright is judged by his ability to create complete, fully fleshed out characters. To do so, the playwright must know everything about them: what they were like as children, their hopes, their desires, their weaknesses; in short, absolutely everything that makes them tick. This requires research; an important component to creating realistic, true-to-life characters. In many cases, research will be an exploration into new territory that can point you in a new direction or confirm something you intuitively knew about a character.

Some writers love research; some resent the fact that it takes time away from the actual writing. Regardless, it is a vital and necessary part of the process. Without knowledge of the details about each character’s life and surroundings, you risk creating stereotypes. Research will help you understand your character and make him/her fuller and deeper.

You will find yourself spending countless hours at the library reading and learning about the time period in which your character lived. If your play is set within the last few decades, it might be helpful to phone or meet with people who actually lived during that time.

There are two types of research: general and specific. You’re doing general research all the time by observing people and their surroundings. But specific research entails a bit more. It will help you understand the period in history in which your characters lived, or the specific limitations faced by a character with a disability—blindness, for instance. Since there’s a good chance you are not blind yourself or may not know someone who is, you’ll need to learn all you can about what being blind entails. Even though Robin Cook is a medical doctor, he actually spent three weeks interviewing a neuro-radiologist for his medical thriller *Outbreak*. This is a good example of specific research.

Research will help you understand not only what a character might say, but how he might say it. Dialogue—the actual lines spoken in the play—must be organic to each character and grow out of his/her frame of reference. A man who did not finish grade school and works as a restroom attendant would not have the vocabulary or speech patterns of someone who graduated with honors from an Ivy League school. Similarly, a character from 17<sup>th</sup> century France will have a much different manner of speaking than a character living in Georgia in the 1990s. These profound differences must be reflected in everything the character says, feels, and thinks when he or she is on stage.

Characterization and dialogue go hand-in-hand. In theater, the character is what he says and what he says is the character. At times the dialogue is there for the purpose of exposition, that is, to “expose” or reveal things about other characters or events in the play. This is both necessary and difficult to do, but it shouldn’t be obvious; it must happen without the audience being aware it is taking place.

Chekhov and Ibsen wrote some of the most believable characters in theater. Whether or not you like their plays, it is undeniable that they created excellent, fully-formed characters, and wrote plays in the 1800s and early 1900s that are still relevant today.

Characterization is the end result of many different factors: how the character speaks; how he or she looks; their age, their social standing, and even the day and time of their birth (which determines their birth signs). As we mentioned earlier, characters become stereo-typical because they seem based on a “personality type” rather than a real person. Just as an actor can be “typecast,” a character can be a “type” rather than a real character.

Let’s look at some lines spoken by a man named Bob. We know nothing about him. I’ve improvised a little on what Bob might say:

**BOB:** (Angry) I’ve had enough of you! First you say one thing and then you say another. You can’t make up your mind about anything! Can you at least make up your mind about how you feel about me? We’ve been together for three years now, and I still don’t know how you feel about me. In fact, I don’t know how you feel about anybody!

This is just a piece of random dialogue. The man is arguing with a woman he has been going with for three years. But who is he? Let’s say he lives with the woman he’s talking to, and let’s also say she is a person who runs hot and cold. Sometimes she says she’d like to get married; other times she says she’d never marry, and so forth.

Let’s add one crucial element. Let’s say Bob is much older than she is. Let’s say he’s in his 70s and she’s in her 40s. This would probably change things quite drastically. The 70-year-old Bob addressing a much younger woman is likely to speak differently than his 40- or 50 year old counterpart. Instead he might say:

**BOB:** How do you feel about me? It’s hard for me to know that. We’ve been together for three years, and at first it seemed so good—between us, I mean. You said the fact that I was older didn’t matter. I believed you when you said it—but now I don’t know. I get so mad, because I feel like I’m fooling myself by listening to you. What you say, I mean. Do you still love me? Is there another man in your life and you’re afraid to tell me? I know—I just know you’re going to hook up with some younger man and leave me. But don’t spare me, please don’t spare me! Tell me what’s going on.

This character undergoes a dramatic change with the addition of just one element: his age in relation to hers. You may have noticed in the rewrite I didn’t offer any instructions as to how the actor playing Bob should say his lines. Initially I had written “Angry” in parenthesis to indicate how the lines should be delivered. This is almost never a good idea. You should always rely on the power of your lines to convey the feeling you want from your character. A good actor may choose to deliver these lines softly, in a kind of intense whisper, for greater effect. If the written lines get the feeling across, you should free the actor and the director to do their jobs and bring your words to life.

Now let's have some more fun with Bob. Let's say the man is unsure about the relationship. He is completely insecure about the woman, and jealous of everyone who even glances in her direction; he is very possessive.

At this point, his age might be closer to her age. Now, let's hear what a jealous, younger Bob might say.

**BOB:** What is going on? I just can't trust you! The moment my back is turned you're giving some guy the eye. I saw you last night when we were having dinner. You pretended you were looking at the menu and you were looking over the menu at that guy at the other table. Three years we've been together—that long—and you just can't be faithful. It's not in you. Even my brother—my own brother! You're so nice to him whenever he's around. Like yesterday when you knew he was coming over. You put on the dress—the tight red one. God! You're so transparent! When will I ever be able to trust you—when?

Though this is a very superficial exercise, it helps to show how dialogue grows out of the character and the situation. That's why it's so important that you get to know your character beforehand. Let's take a look at a speech from *Uncle Vanya* by one of the greats, Anton Chekhov. I don't need to tell you what the character of Vanya is like. Just listen to him talk.

**VANYA:** Everything is old. I am just as I always was, perhaps worse, for I have grown lazy. I do nothing but grumble like some old crow. My old magpie mama is still babbling about the rights of women. With one foot in the grave, she is still rummaging in her learned books for the dawn of a new life.

We can admire the ability of Chekhov as a writer. In just simple sentences, what do we learn? We find out Vanya feels he's the same way he always was. He hasn't just grown old, but also lazy and grumpy, a complainer. And indeed, he is a complainer. Next he complains about his "magpie" mother and her babbling, and her hang-up on women's rights, which he must think is silly. Notice how he uses two birds to describe himself and his mother. He's the crow; she's the magpie.

Chekhov uses this short speech to shed some light on another character: Vanya's mother. A good playwright uses dialogue not only to tell us about the character speaking, but about other characters in the play. This is exposition. How does Vanya feel about other people? Only one line later he talks about another important character in the play—the professor. Vanya doesn't like the professor much. How would he let us know? Let's hear him.

**VANYA:** The professor, as before sits in his study writing from morning until night. With furrowed brow and racking brains, he writes and writes and writes and writes and never a word of praise do we hear for our labors on his behalf. He had much better be writing his autobiography. Ah, what a superb subject! A retired professor, you know—an old dry-as-dust, a learned fish, gout, rheumatism, migraine, envy and jealousy have altered his liver. The old fish is living on his first wife's estate, living there against his will because he can't afford to live in town. He is always complaining of his misfortunes, though, as a matter of fact, he is exceptionally fortunate. (Nervously) Just think how fortunate! The son of a humble sacristan, he has risen to university distinctions and the chair of a professor, he has become "your Excellency," the son-in-law of a senator, and so on, and so on. And just think about this; the man has been lecturing and writing about art for twenty-five years and he knows absolutely nothing about art. For twenty-five years he has been chewing over other men's ideas about realism, naturalism, and all sorts of nonsense; for twenty-five years he has been lecturing and writing on things all intelligent people know about already and stupid ones aren't interested in—so for twenty-five years he has been wasting his time. And with all that, what conceit! What pretensions! He has retired and not a living soul knows anything about him; he is absolutely unknown. So for twenty-five years all he has done is to keep a better man out of a job! But look at him; he struts about like a demigod!

This speech is a great one to study because it does so many things at one time. First, we get to know Vanya a little better and observe how envious he is of the professor. But, we also get to know quite a bit about the professor even before he comes on stage. One of the most difficult things to do in dialogue is to prepare the audience for other characters and situations. Again, this is done through exposition, which is vital to your play.

### **Exposition Through Dialogue**

As we mentioned earlier, exposition must be done without making your audience aware that it's taking place. Chekhov is a master at it. Notice what flow and balance the speech has; it is beautifully constructed. It also lays the groundwork for things to come. Vanya despises the professor so deeply he will actually try to kill him. This hatred is established right here in this speech. Later on, when Vanya can take it no longer, he rushes in with a gun and fires at the professor (and misses). We accept his behavior and actions because, as the play goes along, Chekhov shows us the profound disdain Vanya feels for the man. Finally, after other events are unveiled, there are only two things Vanya feels able to do: either, kill the professor, or himself. He intends to do one or the other.

Before we discussed the fact that Ibsen is also a master of characterization, and is superb at writing dialogue. Let's take a look at a speech from *Ghosts*. This play deals with syphilis. The title is a reference to this dread disease, which was passed on at birth to a young artist named Oswald. Throughout, Oswald's mother, Mrs. Alving, uses the word "ghosts" to refer to the disease, which her husband brought into their bed, and she in turn passed on to their young son. It is very telling that she is unable to say the word out loud. What skill Ibsen displays! The lines are beautifully written. Here is Mrs. Alving talking to Pastor Manders, who is also unable to utter the word syphilis. At this point, Mrs. Alving is aware that her son wants to marry Regina, which means he will pass the disease on to his own children. Ibsen covers all bases in this one speech.

**MRS. ALVING:** Ghosts! When I heard Regina and Oswald in there, it was as though ghosts rose up before me. But I almost think we are all of us ghosts, Pastor Manders. It is not only what we have inherited from our mother and father that "walks" in us. It is all sorts of dead ideas, and lifeless old beliefs and so forth. They have no vitality, but they cling to us all the same and we cannot shake them off. Whenever I take up a newspaper, I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines. There must be ghosts all the country over, as thick as the sands of the sea. And then we are, one and all, so pitifully afraid of the light.

**PASTOR MANDERS:** Aha—here we have the fruits of your reading. And pretty fruits they are, upon my word! Oh, those horrible, revolutionary, freethinking books!

Mrs. Alving is hardly able to get through to Pastor Manders. If anything; Manders is horrified by her speech and chooses to blame everything on "revolutionary freethinking" caused by books. What does this tell you about Pastor Manders? Ibsen creates his characters and uses dialogue, as does Chekhov, to move the plot along and lay out exposition in the process. Notice how both characters can't come to grips with this sexually transmitted disease—certainly not Pastor Manders. But at least Mrs. Alving is beginning to see that we inherit other things besides syphilis: dead ideas, lifeless, old beliefs that, although they have no real vitality, still cling to us. Then Ibsen ends the speech with fantastic insight: we're "so pitifully afraid of the light."

These are excerpts from two 19<sup>th</sup> century classics, but what about more modern plays? Let's move forward a little to 1938, when Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* made theater history. This was a radical play in those days, performed on a bare stage without props, something that had never been done before. *Our Town* is a non-illusionistic, presentational drama that is at the same time informal, intimate, and compellingly human. Here's a speck given by Emily while watching her mother prepare breakfast on the morning of her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. At this point, Emily is dead, a spirit invisible to everyone on stage; only the audience can see her. Wilder's dialogue is superb. In a sense this is post-exposition, but it helps us learn about the other characters in the play.

**EMILY:** I can't. I can't go on. Oh! Oh! It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. (*She breaks down sobbing*) I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back—up the hill—to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look. Good-bye, good-bye, world. Good-bye Grover's Corners... Mama and Papa. Good-bye to clocks ticking... and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths... and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?

Wilder could have ended the play with this great speech, but he doesn't. Emily returns to her grave, and the Stage Manager ends the play the same way he began it, by addressing the audience. It is, of course, the perfect way to end.

**STAGE MANAGER:** Most everybody's asleep in Grover's Corners. There are a few lights on: Shorty Hawkins, down at the depot, has just watched the Albany train go by. And at the livery stable somebody's sitting up late and talking—yes, it's clearing up. There are the stars doing their old, old criss-cross journey in the sky. Scholars haven't settled the matter yet, but they seem to think there are no living beings up there. They're just chalk... or fire. Only this one is straining away, straining away all the time to make something of itself. The strain's so bad that every sixteen hours everybody lies down and gets a rest. (*He winds his watch*) Hmm... eleven o'clock in Grover's Corners—you get a good rest too, good night.

### **The Plot**

Plot is simply what happens in the play—the actual story. Some plays have no plot, no story, but the vast majority, do. A rule of thumb is that you should be able to state your plot in just a few lines. To quote from *Boy Meets Girl*, the classic play about writing for the movies, “Boy meets girl, boy gets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl. Fade out.” I recommend you write out the storyline, or plot, of your play in greater detail than that for your own use. I use the plot outline as a guide, then add or subtract from it as I go along. Here's a well-known plot told briefly.

A group of people are on the estate of a retired professor, Alexander Serebryakov. He is a pompous man who has returned with his young second wife, Yelena, to write his masterpiece. His daughter by his first wife, Sonya, his first wife's mother, and her brother, Uncle Vanya, grow increasingly unable to endure the professor's assumptions of superiority. The professor threatens to sell the estate, which would turn everybody out. Finally, Uncle Vanya takes two shots at the professor, misses, and life resumes its weary way around the seasons.

This, of course, is the plot for Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. Here's another plot stated in a few words:

A tough-talking single mother with little education spearheads an investigation leading to the largest payoff ever in a direct action lawsuit for toxic damage to people in a small California community.

This is the plot for the movie *Erin Brockovich*. If you've seen the movie, you know there's much more to it than this simple plot statement. For your own use your plot can be written out as an outline or in simple paragraph form. Here is how it's done:

I. Beginning: Point of Attack. Describe the plot. Tell what the story is about.

Describe the characters.

II. Middle: Add complications. Raise the stakes. Describe the conflict in the play.

III. End: Resolution. How is the story resolved? How do you end the play?

The outline of your story can be as detailed as you wish. It can include character names and descriptions, subplots, and any other helpful information. You'll find it's easier to write the play when you've broken down the plot in this manner. Based on the outline above, you might decide to write a one-act play in three scenes.

Another possibility is to write out the action of the play in a scene-by-scene rundown. The action is how things happen in the play. Here's an Action Outline:

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE: Boy meets girl.

ACT ONE, SCENE TWO: Boy gets girl. Boy loses girl.

ACT ONE, SCENE THREE: Boy gets girl back; or, boy doesn't get girl back.

The above is a simplistic example. As I mentioned before, your Action outline should be in greater detail.

The Action Outline has given you two possible endings. You choose the one that works best for you, or perhaps a third one will come to you later as the play evolves. This one-act is slim and trim: it only needs two characters and three scenes to tell the story. As you create the dialogue, you will already have a certain feeling about the characters from your outline. Thus, the dialogue will flow more easily. If on top of this, you have sketched down some character traits for the boy and girl, the dialogue will be sharper and cleaner.

### **An Outline for Your Characters**

Once you have a good idea about plot, you can start thinking more deeply about your characters. At this point you should already have made a list of major and minor characters and started getting to know them a bit. Some writers find it helpful to keep an index card or sheet for each individual character, adding or changing details as they go along.

This character outline is a good starting point. Put your character's name at the top, then create three columns with these headings: 1) Physiology (What does your character look like? His/her physiognomy? What are his/her physical characteristics?) 2) Sociology (What is his/her background/environment like?) and 3) Psychology (What makes him/her tick?)

Here's a character outline for *Cagney and Lacey*, a TV series that was popular in the 80's. Even though they are TV characters, the same rules apply.

#### **Chris Cagney**

- She's single, childless.....
- Her life revolves around her friends.....
- She's oriented to her career.....
- She's for law and order.....
- She's Pro-Choice but does not believe in abortion..... for herself.
- She's against censorship, and wouldn't censor..... and pornography.
- She's against strikes.....
- She finds intimacy difficult and lives alone by choice...
- She easily flies off the handle.....
- She's a workaholic and drinks too much.....

#### **Mary Beth Lacey**

- She's married with children
- Her life revolves around her family.
- She's oriented to her family/personal life.
- She's more of a humanist for individual rights.
- She's Pro-Choice—and has had an abortion, and as a result defends strongly the woman's right to choose.
- She's against the message of pornography, dislikes being constantly bombarded by images that demean women.
- She would never cross a picket line.
- She's in a warm, intimate relationship w/her husband.
- She's patient.
- She's balanced in her life.

If you are having problems with a character in a plot or situation—that is, your character simply isn't working—you may not be able to solve the problem by “fixing” or rewriting. Sometimes the harder you work to get a character to fit into your story, the more artificial the character becomes. In these situations, the best thing is to get rid of the troublesome character and move on.

Henrik Ibsen, speaking of his working methods, discussed how he creates characters:

“When I am writing I must be alone; if I have eight characters of a drama to deal with I have society enough; they keep me busy; I must learn to know them. And this process of making their acquaintance is slow and painful. I make, as a rule, three casts of my dramas, which differ considerably from each other. I mean in characteristics,

not in the course of the treatment. When my characters on a railway journey; the first acquaintance is struck up, and we have chatted about this and that. When I write it down again, I already see everything much more clearly, and I know the people as if I had stayed with them for a month at a watering place. I have grasped the leading points of their characters and their little peculiarities.”

What did Ibsen see? What did he mean when he said, “I have grasped the leading points of their characters and their little peculiarities?” In his book, *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, Ljos Egri has an outline for creating a character.

#### PHYSIOLOGY

1. Sex.
2. Age.
3. Height and weight.
4. Color of hair, eyes, skin.
5. Posture.
6. Appearance: good-looking, over- or under-weight, clean, neat, untidy. Shape of head, face, limbs.
7. Heredity.

#### SOCIOLOGY

1. Class: lower, middle, upper.
2. Occupation: type of work, hours of work, income, condition of work, union or non-union, attitude toward organization, suitability for work.
3. Education: amount, kind of schools, marks, favorite subjects, poorest subjects, aptitudes.
4. Home life: parents living, earning power, orphan, parents separated or divorced, parents' habits, parents' mental development, parents' vices, neglect, character's marital status.
5. Religion.
6. Race, nationality.
7. Place in community: leader among friends, clubs, sports.
8. Political affiliations.
9. Amusements, hobbies: books, newspapers, magazines read.

#### PSYCHOLOGY

1. Sex life, moral standards.
2. Personal premise, ambition.
3. Frustrations, chief disappointments.
4. Temperament: choleric, easygoing, pessimistic, optimistic.
5. Attitude toward life: resigned, militant, defeatist.
6. Complexes: obsessions, inhibitions, superstitions, phobias.
7. Extrovert, introvert, ambivert.
8. Abilities: languages, talents.
9. Qualities: imagination, judgment, taste, poise.
10. I.Q.

#### **Real Life Situations**

Many plays that are fictional often contain people and situations from the playwright's life. Because we know more about real life situations and characters than made up ones, this lends a touch of realism. For the sake of dramatic impact, to get a point across, or simply to propel the plot along, playwrights will often exaggerate a personality trait or add fictionalized events to the story. Usually writers will change names and locales to protect the people involved, and of

course, to avoid lawsuits. Remember you are not allowed to write about real people without their permission (and make sure you get permission in writing).

One way to get around this problem is to distance your play as much as possible from the actual people, incidents, or locations in question. Changing key details in the plot; altering a character's sex, ethnicity, or physical appearance; or developing fictional characters or subplots around the main events are all ways to accomplish this. Whether you're staying true to the facts or changing the story substantially, remember that your ability to dramatize is paramount when it comes to writing about real people who might not be all that interesting without some embellishment.

### **Supporting Characters**

An important function of a supporting character is to help convey the theme or premise of the story. But what do you do when supporting characters take over the story? When this happens, it usually points to a problem in your story or plot line. Sometimes this comes as a blessing in disguise, forcing you to take your play in a new and unexpected direction. Some writers welcome this because it forces them to look at the play and characters in a whole new light. When asked how he developed his characters, Bernard Shaw replied, "I create them and I let them rip." Shaw felt that characters, if well developed, will take on a life of their own and lead the playwright rather than the other way around.

There are ways of solving character problems. One way is to examine the "hidden agenda" of a character. What does the character want? How can he or she get it? By going over this hidden agenda, you rethink the character. Another method is to find someone to read your character's lines out loud. Listen to the dialogue in relation to that of the other characters, then ask yourself if it sounds realistic.

### **The Theme of Your Play**

Sam Warner, who at one time owned Warner Brothers studio, did not particularly favor movies with something to say. The famous quote, "If you have a message, call Western Union," is attributed to him. Like Mr. Warner, some people are only interested in movies and plays for their entertainment value, and have no use for a writer's perspective on life, truth, morality, and so forth.

The fact is that all the great playwrights had something to say that was so important to them, they spent a good portion of their lives saying it. To them, the theme—or message—of the play was the sole reason for writing it. In my view, plays without a message or theme are hollow and artificial; they may entertain, but they don't enlighten or move people to think, or take action, or dream. Even the great comedies, such as Molière's *The Doctor in Spite of Himself* and Shaw's *A Doctor's Dilemma*, offer us much more than a few laughs.

If you have a message—something you passionately believe in and want to put out into the world—it will actually be easier to write your play. This theme or premise will give you something to work toward; it will be your catalyst—the thing that drives the plot and creates conflict between your characters, and helps you find a way to bring all the elements of the play at the outset and will discover it as he/she goes along. Other times, the premise will change as the writing progresses and characters and events unfold.

If you know the theme of your play, it might be helpful to write it down in as few words as possible. For instance, setting out to write *Macbeth*, Shakespeare might have written, "ambition brings destruction," which is the basic premise of his play. In Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman discovers "the American dream is a sham, and being well-liked will not make you successful." Another common premise is "jealousy leads to destruction," as exemplified by *Othello*, Shakespeare's famous tragedy.

### **Protagonist and Antagonist: The Pivotal Characters**

The words “protagonist” and “antagonist” are often used in writing and drama classes, even though not every writer knows the terms. (It is not likely that Shakespeare was familiar with these terms. Ibsen never uses them when discussing his writing, nor does Bernard Shaw.) However they are useful to know because they will help you understand conflict, another vital element of any successful play.

Protagonist is actually a political term meaning “anyone who takes the lead in any movement or cause.” Thus, the protagonist of your play is your “lead,” or “main” character, around whom the action centers. Anyone who opposes the protagonist is known as the antagonist. The antagonist propels the play along by creating conflict and “locking horns” with the protagonist, which in turn moves the protagonist to action. In Shakespeare’s *Othello*, the protagonist is, of course, Othello. By sowing the seeds of dissension and jealousy in *Othello*, Iago, the play’s antagonist, propels the story to its tragic end.

Remember one important thing: the antagonist must be as strong as the protagonist. Conflict happens because these two grand personalities clash. King Claudius is the ruthless, conniving antagonist to Hamlet, Shakespeare’s famous protagonist. Opposites attract; opposites repel.

The conflict created when one character opposes another is a form of cause and effect. Thousands of character traits could set the cause and effect into motion. Just as cold and heat create conflict, so do personality types that are opposites. Here are a few opposites that could describe a protagonist and an antagonist:

Frugal—spendthrift	cheerful—morbid
Moral—immoral	healthy-hypochondriac
Dirty—immaculate	humorous—humorless
Optimistic—pessimistic	sensitive—insensitive
Gentle—ruthless	dainty—vulgar
Faithful—fickle	naïve—worldly
Clever—stupid	brave—cowardly
Imaginative—dull	calm—violent

How would a frugal character get along with a spendthrift? How does a dirty person get along with an immaculate one? Do they create conflict and move the action of the play forward? Neil Simon’s *The Odd Couple* is a good example of conflict between opposites. Felix is immaculate and Oscar is a slob. Oscar, for the most part, is healthy, while Felix is a hypochondriac. It could easily be said that Oscar is insensitive and Felix is sensitive. Much of the humor of the play grows out of these opposing personality traits. Remember that no dialogue, no matter how clever, and no plot twist, no matter how inventive, will move your play along if it does not further the conflict. If your characters are static, the play goes nowhere.

Are you ready to tackle the actual writing of your play? Have you settled on a style and atmosphere? Will your play be a comedy or a drama? Can you write down a short synopsis of what happens? Are you able to isolate a main theme and describe it in just a few words? Have you made a list of characters in your play and considered their history and personality traits? If so, you’re ready to think about conflict, and how it affects each of your characters. Remember that characterization and dialogue go hand-in-hand. The character is what he says.

Ultimately the success of your play hinges on your ability to pull all these elements together and give the director, actors, and technical staff what they need to bring your characters to life. If you put these ideas to work, you are well on your way to writing a good play.

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