

# **Introduction to Playwriting**

## **HANDBOOK OF ACTIVITIES**

Prepared by  
Stephen DiMenna  
[steve@stephendimenna.com](mailto:steve@stephendimenna.com)

Prepared for  
The Stratford Shakespeare Festival  
Teacher's Workshop

## PREPARING THE CLASS

The suggestions and activities in this section are intended to introduce your students to the basic idea of playwriting and to prepare them to encounter a process and a person (the teaching artist) who is new. We suggest that you set up a structure for managing the residency and the written material the students will generate throughout the residency.

It is important to set the tone of the residency as something that involves discipline, consistency, persistence, imagination, flexibility and risk-taking. A ritualistic approach helps establish the seriousness of playwriting and assists in maintaining a sense of efficiency.

Here are some ideas:

1. Have the students create a "Playwriting Folder" with loose leaf paper in a spiral bound notebook and a pen tied to the notebook with a string.
2. Store the folders in a milk crate or file box in the classroom.
3. On playwriting days have the students get their notebooks as they enter the classroom as a daily ritual.
4. Create a standard heading for all Playwriting work that includes the date, the students name and the name of the assignment.

Most of our students are more familiar with television and movie formats as a way to tell stories. They will often write plays with multiple short scenes that change location and time that resemble screenplays more than dramatic plays. It is our responsibility to introduce them to the idea of the "well made play" which adheres to the **unity of TIME, PLACE and ACTION**. We believe that when students are writing their first plays it is best to work within the limits of one location and time and to confine their plays to two characters. This challenges them to focus on developing two characters as deeply and specifically as possible and to maintain a single through-line of action and one sustained conflict that builds towards a climax and resolution.

There are three steps towards teaching a creative process: **1) show the students a model of what you want them to do, 2) let them create their own version of that model, 3) provide them with appropriate feedback so they can improve and expand on what they created.** To begin the process of learning to write a play the students should read a play that demonstrates the unity of time, place and action and has two characters. Edward Albee's **The Zoo Story** is a perfect one-act play that demonstrates the model we want our students to learn. Get a classroom set of the play and take substantial time for the students to read it **before the teaching artist's first visit.**

The activity **READ A PLAY** and the writing assignments **CHARACTER INNER MONOLOGUE** and **CHARACTER JOURNAL ENTRY** are designed to help students learn how to read a play and explore the psychology of character development.

# **READ A PLAY**

## **Lesson**

**AIM:** How is reading a play different than reading other forms of literature?

**OBJECTIVE:** To help students understand and interpret dramatic writing.

**STUDENTS WILL:** Read a one-act play both silently and aloud and respond to focus questions related to the play.

**PROCEDURE:** Reading **The Zoo Story** by Edward Albee

1) Select two students to read the roles of Jerry and Peter and one student to read stage directions.

2) Read aloud the first five to ten pages

3) After finishing the first five to ten pages ask the students to give a first impression personal response to the play and ask these focus questions:

- \* what do we know about these characters so far?
- \* what do you think is going to happen next?
- \* what do you think this play is about?
- \* what more do you want to know about these characters?
- \* has the playwright created a sense of mystery or suspense for what may come next?

4) Continue to read five to ten pages every day for the next few days followed by a discussion.

**NOTE:** Cast different students each day to read the parts and consider gender free casting.

5) After finishing the play ask your students to write a personal response to the play. The **CHARACTER INNER MONOLOGUE** and **CHARACTER JOURNAL ENTRY** are recommended.

## **CHARACTER INNER MONOLOGUE**

### **Writing Activity**

- 1) Ask the students to pick one of the two characters that most interests them.
- 2) Ask the students to identify a "critical moment" in the play for that character. A critical moment may be any one of the following:
  - \* the character has an epiphany
  - \* the character must make an important decision
  - \* the character has a sudden revelation or change of mind
  - \* the character makes an important discovery about himself or the other character
  - \* a piece of information is revealed that has a strong impact on the character
- 3) Ask the students to write a monologue for the character that expresses the "inner thoughts" that are going through the character's mind at this critical moment. This monologue can be addressed to the audience or to the other character. The monologue should be at least a half page to a full page in length.

Let the students know that the "inner thoughts" of the character are thoughts and feelings the character expresses so that the audience can understand what is going on inside the character's mind. It is information the playwright wants the audience to know about the character. Students will make up this information based on their knowledge of the character from reading the play and the inferences they make. Most of it will come from the student's own imaginations.

## **CHARACTER JOURNAL ENTRY**

### **Writing Activity**

- 1) Ask the students to pick one of the characters that most interests them.
- 2) Ask the students to write a journal entry for that character as if the character himself is writing in his personal journal. The entry can be about any of the following:
  - \* the day the action of the play takes place on
  - \* the day before the play takes place
  - \* the day after the play takes place
  - \* thoughts about the other character
  - \* thoughts about the character himself.

## **IDENTIFYING YOURSELF AS AN ARTIST**

At the heart of the creative process is the ability to make strong choices based on your own artistic impulses. The next two exercises are designed to introduce the teaching artist to the students, allow the teaching artist to get to know the students and most importantly to help the students begin to think of themselves as artists.

**NEW LAST NAMES** is a great warm-up activity that is the first step towards the students process of re-defining themselves as artists and writers. It is not only a great way to learn their names but the new last names and the stories they may inspire provide some insight into how the students see themselves as artists.

**WILL IT FLY** is an activity that reveals additional insights about the students as well as illustrates the creative thought processes a playwright goes through when writing a play.

# **NEW LAST NAMES**

## **Lesson**

**AIM:** How do you identify yourself as an artist?

**OBJECTIVE:** To learn the students' names and to begin them on a process of self-exploration and expression.

**STUDENTS WILL:** Say their first names and make up a "new last name" that is based on an attribute they are proud of about themselves.

### **PROCEDURE:**

- 1) Sitting in a circle ask students to tell you their first name followed by a "new last name" that is their "artistic" last name, something about themselves that they think is creative. Give them an example like "Steve poet" or "Ted imaginative dream maker" Ask them what they learn about a person with this name. They will respond, "you like to write poetry" or "you make dreams out of your imagination".

Now ask them to go around and tell the group their new name. While they do so ask follow-up questions when you get an unusual name like: "Tell us about your name and why you picked it". This is a great springboard for discussions and creates a fun environment for students to begin to disclose information about themselves.

**SUMMARY STATEMENT:** You have just begun a process of discovering your identity as artists. It is important for artists to know WHO they are and WHAT they want to say through their art.

# WILL IT FLY ?

## Lesson

**AIM:** How can we get to know each other and start to think like playwrights?

**OBJECTIVE:** To help the students open up and express personal information and to demonstrate the thought process of playwriting.

**STUDENTS WILL:** Make a paper airplane and write facts about themselves on it and fly it.

### PROCEDURE:

1. Ask students to make a paper airplane from a blank sheet of paper.
2. Ask them to write 5 facts about themselves on the plane.  
These can be things like:
  - where you live
  - what your favorite food is
  - how many siblings do you have
  - favorite color
3. Standing in a large circle at the edges of the room instruct the students to throw their planes one at a time and to say all five facts **BEFORE THE PLANE LANDS**

Note: The element of time is important so demonstrate throwing a plane and speaking quickly in order to say all five facts.

4. Go around the circle until each student has thrown their plane.
5. On the board write the students responses to these questions:
  1. What was the first thing you had to think about when asked to write five facts about yourself?
  2. What did you think of next?
  3. Did you say your facts in any particular order in case you didn't get to all five?
  4. Did you shorten any of the sentences you wrote on your plane when you spoke: ex: "My favorite food is pizza" to "favorite food pizza" or "pizza".

## **WILL IT FLY? (Cont.)**

6. The list you want to end up with on the board should look like this:
  1. WHAT to say.
  2. How much TIME do I have to say it.
  3. PRIORITIZE
  4. EDIT
  5. Will it FLY? ((You add this answer on your own)
  
7. Discuss with the students how this list of what THEY had to think about is the same list of the things a PLAYWRIGHT has to think about. Tell them they are ALREADY THINKING LIKE PLAYWRIGHTS.
  
8. Elaborate on this idea by telling them that all writers think about what to say but playwrights more than any other writers have to consider how much time they have to tell their story, therefore they must prioritize and edit more than other writers. And of course on opening night everyone thinks" Will this play fly?"

## **PART THREE: FORM AND CHARACTER**

We believe the first step towards writing a play is the development of interesting well-rounded **characters** who have strong **emotional wants**. The character's wants will lead them to take **action** where they will encounter a series of **obstacles** which will force them to take **new action**. This formula will create a natural **conflict** which is the main ingredient in drama. As the conflict escalates towards a **crisis** or **turning point** the play reaches it's **climax** and will eventually come to some sort of **resolution**. This formula will be outlined in more detail in **Part Four: Structure**.

Before students learn how to structure their plays they should spend some time practicing creating characters. At the same time they need to learn the **form** of playwriting and how it differs from other forms of writing in terms of how it looks on the page. There are three forms of writing in plays and once students learn these they are ready to begin writing.

The forms are:       **Monologue**  
                              **Dialogue**  
                              **Stage Directions**

These three forms are the tools the students will use to construct their plays. First we must teach them the tools then pose a problem or challenge for which they must use the tools. The first tool to introduce the students to is **monologue** because it is the most familiar. It is a simple paragraph form and not unlike writing a letter or journal entry. **THE OBJECT MONOLOGUE** is an easy activity that teaches students how to express a character's inner thoughts in the first person and to understand and empathize with someone, or in this case something other than themselves. It also teaches them how monologues "look" on the page. Before introducing this activity read aloud two monologues from either **The Zoo Story** or August Wilson's play **Fences** as models. **THE PHOTO MONOLOGUE** and **THE W'S LIST** illustrate a process for creating and developing characters and their wants. **THE W'S LIST** will be useful throughout the residency as a tool for creating characters in all writing assignments. Students should practice creating characters from a variety of sources, like photos, newspaper articles, characters from literature or history and even real people they encounter in the community. You may want to give them a few character monologue assignments before you move on to **dialogue**.

Lastly **THE ONE-MINUTE PLAY** teaches students how dialogue looks on the page and how **language** is used to reveal information about characters. The second part of **THE ONE-MINUTE PLAY** activity introduces the final form **stage directions**.

# **THE OBJECT MONOLOGUE**

## **Lesson**

**AIM:** What is a MONOLOGUE and how can we express the inner thoughts and feelings of an object that is personified?

**OBJECTIVE:** To demonstrate how inner monologues can communicate information about a character. To introduce a MONOLOGUE as a form of dramatic writing.

**STUDENTS WILL:** Make up and speak out loud a MONOLOGUE that they create based on an object they select.

### **PROCEDURE:**

- 1) Tell the students we are "going to create characters and that a character is a person in a play."
- 2) Now tell them to think of an OBJECT that is not a human being. It can be an object in the room, in their book bags or you can hold up various object for them to pick from.
- 3) Ask them "what would this object SAY if it could talk and wanted to tell us ABOUT ITS LIFE?" Tell them the object wants to tell us about it's PAST, PRESENT, AND DREAM FOR THE FUTURE.
- 4) Now YOU model an object monologue for them. DO NOT TELL THEM WHAT YOUR OBJECT IS.

### **SAMPLE:**

Oh my life is so boring. All I do is sit here at the bottom of the drawer. I never get picked anymore now that my twin brother ran away. It wasn't always like this. We used to be his favorite pair. Especially in the cold weather. We kept him warm. I used to love to go outside in the snow and get all wet. Now I just sit here all by myself. I hope someday my brother comes back and we get to go out a play like we used to."

## **THE OBJECT MONOLOGUE (Cont.)**

- 5) Now ask them to guess what your object is. The answer is a SOCK.
- 6) Ask them what they learned about the sock's life from what he said?
- 7) Now ask them to pick their object. Tell them NOT TO TELL US WHAT THE OBJECT IS. Instead we should be able to guess from what the object tells us about its life.
- 8) Call on volunteers to SPEAK their monologues.

NOTE: As they speak point out when a student tells us about the PAST, PRESENT, and FUTURE of the object.

NOTE: Make sure they speak in the FIRST PERSON using the words "I", "Me", "My" etc. Do not let them say "He is so lonely and sits at the bottom of the drawer". Tell them a MONOLOGUE is where one character speaks all alone and no one interrupts them in the FIRST PERSON.

FOLLOW UP: Now you can have them create monologues from HUMAN characters that speak about their lives.

**SUMMARY STATEMENT:** You have just created monologues using SPOKEN LANGUAGE to communicate information about the life of a character. This is one way playwrights use language in their plays.

# **THE PHOTO EXERCISE**

## **Lesson**

**AIM:** How can we create characters that are interesting, real and complete?

**OBJECTIVE:** To help students develop well-rounded complete characters.

**STUDENTS WILL:** Develop a monologue for a character based on a photograph. Students will begin to use the basic questions employed to structure characters throughout their writing experience.

**Preparation:** Make photocopies of photographs of individuals. These should be solo photos of one person only. They can be from books or magazines. They can reflect a period of time or an issue being studied in class. Make sure you have enough for each student to select his/her own when the time comes.

### **PROCEDURE:**

1. Hold up one photograph. This will be used for a group brainstorming session.
2. Tell the students there are no right or wrong answers as you will be making things up as you go along. Ask the following questions and put the answers on the board:
  1. Who is this person? Age, occupation and general biographical information from what they can see in the photo.
  2. What is his/her name?
  3. What is special about him/her? The way he/she talks, walks dresses. Flesh out a personality.
  4. Where is he/she? Derive what information you can from the photo. Get students to be specific about a location. For example: a restaurant? Expensive or cheap? What kind of food? Does the character eat there regularly?
  5. How does he/she feel about being there? Happy, sad, angry etc. What does the expression in the picture tell you?

**NOTE:** So far you have given your character an identity, grounded him/her in a place and set the emotional tone. You are ready to shift the discussion to structure. The next questions are the most important ones. These are the "W" questions

### **THE PHOTO EXERCISE (Cont.)**

6. WHAT does he/she want? need? dream about?  
Whatever answers you get are fine. Encourage the class to agree on the most important or dramatic one.
7. WHAT is stopping him/her from getting it? Needs a job has no money, has no friends, lacks the courage etc.
8. WHAT does he/she need to tell you? about what he/she wants and WHY he/she wants it.
9. WHO is he/she telling it to? Can this other character give him/her what she wants? Are they they obstacle or an ally?
10. WHY is this day different from any other day? Why must they speak this monologue today?

**NOTE:** Characters in plays talk because they are compelled to in order to get what they want. Stress that each student has the right to his/her own definition of what the character needs to tell. Once this character profile has been created move on to step three.

3. Ask each student to write a monologue for the group created character where the character expresses what they want and why to the other invisible character.
4. A variation of this activity would be to let each student choose their own photo and go through the process you just modeled on their own.

**NOTE:** Instruct the students to focus on what the character IS COMPELLED TO TELL. The character needn't give away what they want right away but their WANT/NEED should drive their words.

5. Give them time to write. This can take some time so it might become homework due at a later date.
6. Read and discuss the monologues.

**SUMMARY STATEMENT:** You have just created a character(s) by using a set of KEY QUESTIONS and inventing the answers for that character. You can use these questions to develop all your characters using pictures, drawing, or from faces you see or imagine.

**FOLLOW-UP:** The monologues can easily be developed into scenes if you ask the students to write what the invisible character would say after the monologue or before. What would the next scene be, who would be in it?

# **CREATING CHARACTERS: THE W'S LIST**

## **Lesson**

**AIM:**How do we create characters for our play that have strong emotional wants?

**OBJECTIVE:** To encourage students to create well-rounded, fully developed characters for their plays.

**STUDENTS WILL:** Write a character profile and biography for each of their characters.

### **PROCEDURE:**

1. Write these words in a column on the board:

WHO: (Character)  
WHAT AGE:  
WHAT DOES HE/SHE LOOK LIKE:  
WHERE: (Setting/Place)  
WHEN: (Time)  
WHAT DOES HE/SHE WANT: (Objective / intention)  
WHY DOES HE/SHE WANT IT: (Motivation)  
WHAT DOES HE/SHE DO TO GET IT: (Action / tactic)  
WHAT STANDS IN HIS/HER WAY: (Obstacle)  
WHY IS THIS DAY DIFFERENT: (Trigger or inciting moment))

2. Brainstorm with the students and come up with a single character and answer all of the questions for that character. The board should look like this:

WHO: Antonio  
WHAT AGE: A teen-aged boy, a senior in high school  
WHAT DOES HE LOOK LIKE: He's Latino, tall and athletic with black hair. He wears glasses and is considered good looking.  
WHERE: His father's grocery store in the Bronx.  
WHEN: The present, a winter's day.  
WHAT DOES HE WANT: He wants to go away to college.  
WHY DOES HE WANT IT No one in his family has gone to college and he wants to make his family proud. He doesn't want to end up like some of his friends who never leave the old neighborhood. He dreams of being a doctor.

WHAT DOES HE DO TO GET IT: He must ask his father's permission and blessing.  
WHAT GETS IN HIS WAY: His father does not want him to leave. He always hoped Antonio would take over the family business  
WHY IS THIS DAY DIFFERENT: Antonio just received his acceptance letter and he

knows he must tell his father about it.

**CREATING CHARACTERS: THE W'S LIST (Cont.)**

3. Now make the same list for the second character. (Antonio's father)
4. Now you have two characters that the students know fairly well. The important character facts are who they are and what they want. Ask the students to write a detailed biography for each character that includes some of the information:

Hobbies  
Beliefs / Values  
Education  
Family composition  
Childhood history  
Cultural background  
Religious background  
Economic situation  
Other people who are important to them

5. Have the students share their biographies and compare and contrast the different visions each writer has for these characters.
6. Now ask them to create two characters for their play and go through the same process.

**NOTE:** This activity can be introduced in one lesson but you may want to take several days for writing and sharing time.

# **THE ONE MINUTE PLAY**

## **Lesson**

**AIM:** What is DIALOGUE and how does it look on the page? How can spoken dialogue reveal information about a character?

**OBJECTIVE:** To generate written dialogue immediately in a spontaneous, non-threatening manner. To introduce the concept of dialogue and show how a page from a play looks on paper.

**STUDENTS WILL:** Write one page of dialogue between two characters in one minute.

### **PROCEDURE:**

- 1) Ask students to take out a blank sheet of paper. In the center of the page ask them to write the number 1 followed by a colon. Tell them to skip two lines and write a number 2 followed by a colon. Ask them to continue to number 1:, 2:, 1:, 2:, and so on until they get to the bottom of the paper.
- 2) Tell them these number are nameless characters in a play they will have one minute to write. It is not important who they are. Instead what is important is that they fill in as much of the page with dialogue as they can in 60 seconds. Speed is more important than content for this activity.
- 3) Now give them the first line of dialogue for character #1.  
**NOTE:** it should be a line that will inspire conflict or high emotion like:  
"You can't change me...."  
"You don't understand...."  
"If you would just listen to me...."  
"What do you think you're doing..."
- 4) Ask everyone to write down the SAME line underneath the first number 1. Everyone now has the same first line. It should look like this:

1:  
You can't change me\_\_\_\_\_

- 5) Now tell them that when you say “GO” they will have one minute to write what number 2 says back, what number 1 says after that and so on until they fill the page or time is up.

**NOTE:** Tell the students not to worry about what the characters say as much as filling up the page and writing as fast as they can.

- 6) Say “GO” and let them write. Announce how much time is left at 30 seconds, 10 seconds, 5 second until you say “STOP”

**NOTE:** The emphasis is on speed so that the students don't get blocked by the fact that they are writing a play for the first time. We don't want them to think “I don't know what to write” we want them to think about how much time they have to fill up the page.

- 7) When they have finished as them to find a partner and tell them to read each partners play out loud to each other. Each partner will be either number 1 or number 2.

- 8) Now have them read them out loud to the class.

**NOTE:** As you listen to the plays listen for these attributes:

RELATIONSHIP  
CONFLICT  
ACTION  
WANT

- 9) Ask the group questions like:

“Did these two characters sound like they knew each other or where they strangers?”

“Was there a conflict between them?”

“Was there action, were they doing something?”

“Was it clear what the characters wanted from each other?”

- 10) Then ask “How could you tell?” You will here responses like:

“We could tell from they way they talked or what they said”

- 11) Now tell them that “ we learned about the characters relationship or their conflict or actions from their language, from WHAT they said” .

- 12) Now read one of the plays and write the dialogue on the board.

Ask the writer how they want the character to feel when they say the first line. If they say "angry" write (angry) in parenthesis before the line. This will illustrate and "emotional" stage direction.

- 13) Now ask the writer to give you an action or activity the character can do on the next line. If they say "walks over to the table and bangs on it" write that in parenthesis. This illustrates an "action" stage direction.
- 14) Ask the students to insert two emotional and two action stage directions in their plays.

**FOLLOW-UP:** Ask the students to add three pages to their plays and to do a **W'S LIST** for each of the two characters. They will now re-write their plays with characters names instead of numbers and more developed dialogue and stage directions once they know more about their characters.

**SUMMARY STATEMENT:** You just wrote a page of dialogue in one minute, do you see how easy it was? DIALOGUE is where two or more characters talk to each other and is one way a PLAYWRIGHT uses written language to communicate his/her ideas.

SAMPLE PAGE OF DIALOGUE:

*(Your students papers should look something like this:)*

1:

You can't change me. This is who I am.

2:

I don't like what I see young lady. As long as you live in my house you'll do what I say.

1:

I'm 17 and I can do what I want.

2:

Oh you think so. You think it's easy for me to run this family?

1:

You're not doing such a great job-

2:

Don't speak to me like that. You're not going to the party and that's my final word.

1:

But everyone's going to be there!

2:

I'm not having you running around at all hours with those friends of yours.

1:

I can't believe this.

## **WHAT IS A PLAY?**

### **Lesson/Discussion**

**AIM:**What is a play? How do playwright's tell stories?

**OBJECTIVE:** To introduce students to live theatre and help them understand the difference between it and other art forms.

**STUDENTS WILL:** Answer questions and tell stories.

#### **PROCEDURE:**

- 1) Introduce the concept of STORY by asking the following questions:
  - \* What is the most extraordinary situation you were ever in?
  - \* Do you remember a time you had to make a tough decision?
  - \* Have you ever done something that you don't understand?
  
- 2) Explore PLOT and CHARACTER by soliciting a story from one student. Ask the student to give you as many details about plot and character as possible.
  - \* Describe the scenario. What was the mood of the people involved?
  - \* How did they look? What did they do?
  - \* How were you involved? How did the situation get resolved?
  
- 3) Explore LANGUAGE by asking the storyteller to find images that express the feeling of the event. Focus on the DIALOGUE

- of the story by asking what was SAID during particular compelling moments.
- 4) Explore THEME. Discuss the impact of the story on the class and identify its universality.
    - \* What makes this story compelling?
    - \* How did the word choices of the teller affect you?
    - \* What is the universal theme of this story? Can you relate to it in any way.
  5. Now tell the story of the play you are seeing.
  6. Follow the same line of questions above relating them to the play you are seeing

## **WHAT IS A PLAY?**

### **Resource**

What is the biggest difference between a play and a movie?

Plays use LANGUAGE as the most important means of communication. For a playwright, language is the key to human relationships. The art of theatre is the art of persuasion and expression with WORDS. A play is also performed LIVE: this means that the audience is part of a live event. How the audience listens affects the quality of the performance.

The average American has more experience with film and television than with live theatre.

Film is predominantly an experience of IMAGES. The director has control of the audience's eye, taking the spectator through the experience with a series of carefully selected compositions or arrangements of pictures within the frame. Once a film is completed it is frozen in time. A film can be played again and again. The image will remain the same although our PERCEPTION of it may change.

Theatre is predominantly an experience of LANGUAGE. The language is a treasure chest of clues to be interpreted by directors, designers and actors in their effort to realize the playwright's thoughts or intent.

A play is performed live, so each time it is happening for the first time. The text can be timeless because of its universal exploration of the human condition. Many older classic playwrights works continue to live because we recreate their work with a contemporary perspective and give it new meaning. A play has literal time and space because it actually happens within the

context of two hours in one room. However it still has the capacity to transcend time and space in the imaginations of the audience.

A classic play contains the most enduring expressions of the human condition. In plays the actor is the primary communicator of the ideas expressed in the language of the playwright.

## STUDENT WORKSHEET WHAT IS A PLAY?

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_ CLASS \_\_\_\_\_

Insert the following words in the appropriate spaces below:

- |                         |                          |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Language             | 6. Words                 |
| 2. Live                 | 7. Listens               |
| 3. Images               | 8. Perception            |
| 4. Theatre              | 9. Universal exploration |
| 5. Primary communicator | 10. Classic playwrights  |

Plays use \_\_\_\_\_ as the most important means of communication. For all playwrights, language is the key to human relationships. The art of theatre is the art of persuasion and expression with \_\_\_\_\_. A Play is also performed \_\_\_\_\_: this means that the audience is part of a live event. How the audience \_\_\_\_\_ affects the quality of the performance.

The average American has more experience with film and television than with live theatre.

Film is predominantly an experience of \_\_\_\_\_. The director has control of the audience's eye, taking the spectator through the experience with a series of selected compositions or arrangements of pictures within the frame. Once a film is completed it is frozen in time. A film can be played again and again. The image will remain the same although our \_\_\_\_\_ of it may change.

\_\_\_\_\_ is predominantly an experience of language. The language is a treasure chest of clues to be interpreted by directors, designer and actors in an effort to realize the playwright's thoughts or intent.

A Play is performed live, so each time it is happening for the first time. The text can be timeless because of its \_\_\_\_\_ of the human condition. \_\_\_\_\_ continues to live because we approach the work with a contemporary perspective and give it new meaning. A play has literal time and space because it actually happens within the context of two hours in one room. However it still has the capacity to transcend time and sons of the audience.

A classic play contains the most enduring expressions of the human condition. In plays the actor is the \_\_\_\_\_ of the ideas expressed in the language of the playwright.

## **STRUCTURE**

Now that students have the tools of the form of playwriting they are ready to learn the building blocks of the structure of a play. We have designed a simple **FORMULA FOR MAKING A PLAY** that will help students visualize the structure of drama:

**Character**  
+  
**Emotional Want**  
+  
**Trigger or inciting moment**  
+  
**Action**  
+  
**Obstacle**  
=  
**CONFLICT**  
+  
**New Action**  
+  
**New Obstacles**  
+  
**Crisis / Turning Point**  
=  
**CLIMAX**  
+  
**Resolution**  
=  
**A PLAY**

The foundation of a play is a well developed **character** who has a strong **emotional want**. If the the students invest time and effort into creating a well-rounded character the other elements of structure will be easy to develop. The more they know about their characters; childhood background, family relationships, social and cultural history, hobbies, interests, hopes, fears and dreams, the more information they will have at their disposal when they are writing dialogue and developing the **conflict**.

## Structure (Cont.)

The next section outlines a process that takes the students through each of the building blocks step by step. Students consistently have trouble with the building blocks of **action** and **conflict** so it is important to give these extra time and attention. Impress upon the students that **action** in a play is **talking** and that characters use **language** as the primary tool to get what they want. We want the students to use **active persuasive language** that uses every literary device at their disposal. The key to vibrant dialogue is in the **details**. The more descriptive and detailed the language is the more compelling and authentic the dialogue will be. Strong action **verbs**, colorful **adjectives** and **adverbs** and poetic **imagery**, create a sense of vitality and energy in the dialogue, and momentum that drives the characters and the action of the play forward.

Setting up the initial **conflict** comes easy for students. However sustaining, building and resolving that conflict can be a challenge. Students can get stuck after the conflict has been established and they run out of things for the characters to say. They fall into the trap of "fight or flight". They resort to a physical fight or having a character exit the scene with cliched lines like "Fine then I'm leaving!". These are the two big "don'ts" of playwriting.

Students must keep their characters engaged in a **verbal** wrestling match that uses language as the primary weapon. **THE DOLLAR BILL** and **THE DRAMATIC ARC** lessons will outline ways to use language as action and the build and sustain a conflict. These lessons make take more time and may need to be repeated until the students understand the process fully.

**THE FORMULA FOR MAKING A PLAY**  
**PART ONE: INCITING MOMENT**  
**ACTION+ OBSTACLE+CONFLICT**  
**Lesson**

**AIM:** What are the building blocks of drama that will help us construct our plays?

**OBJECTIVE:** To outline the basic structure of how a play works.

**STUDENTS WILL:** Observe a demonstration and discussion of the formula and brainstorm ideas for improvised scenes.

**PROCEDURE:**

1) Write the following "formula" on the board:

**Character**  
+  
**Emotional Want**  
+  
**Trigger or inciting moment**  
+  
**Action**  
+  
**Obstacle**  
=  
**CONFLICT**  
+  
**New Action**  
+  
**New Obstacles**  
+  
**Crisis / Turning Point**  
=  
**CLIMAX**  
+  
**Resolution**  
=  
**A PLAY**

## THE FORMULA FOR MAKING A PLAY: PART ONE (Cont.)

- 2) Using two characters and a situation from one of the **One Minute Plays** or new characters the students create for this activity brainstorm with the class and write **The W'S List** for each character on the board.
- 3) Either through an improvised scene or class discussion construct a scene that takes the students through each of the building blocks. Here's the scene from **The W'S List** as an example:

WHO: Antonio

WHAT AGE: A teen-aged boy, a senior in high school

WHAT DOES HE LOOK LIKE:

He's Latino, tall and athletic with black hair. He wears glasses and is considered good looking.

WHERE: His father's grocery store in the Bronx

WHEN: The present, a winter's day.

WHAT DOES HE WANT: He wants to go away to college.

WHY DOES HE WANT IT: No one in his family has gone to college and he wants to make his family proud. He doesn't want to end up like some of his friends who never leave the old neighborhood. He dreams of being a doctor.

WHAT DOES HE DO TO GET IT: He must ask his father's permission and blessing.

WHAT GETS IN HIS WAY: His father does not want him to leave. He always hoped Antonio would take over the family business.

- 4) Ask the students this question and brainstorm several possible answers:

WHY IS THIS DAY DIFFERENT THAN ANY OTHER DAY IN ANTONIO'S LIFE?

Once you select an answer:

*"Antonio just received his acceptance letter and he must tell his father about it."*

Explain that this event; the arrival of the letter, is the **trigger** or **inciting moment** of the play and it sets the action of the play in motion.

## THE FORMULA FOR MAKING A PLAY (Cont.)

- 5) Explain that: "Antonio must take **action** to get what he wants: his father's permission"

Improvise the first lines of dialogue Antonio says to his father and his father's response.

Example:

ANTONIO:

Dad I've got something to tell you.

FATHER:

You're late for work. Where have you been?

ANTONIO:

That's what I want to talk to you about dad. I got a letter today...

FATHER:

Help me with these boxes-

ANTONIO:

Dad, listen... I've got something to tell you...I got accepted to the University of Minnesota. The letter just came today-

FATHER:

I told you I don't want to hear any talk of college. It's just a pipe dream. Now help me with these boxes.

- 6) Stop the dialogue here and ask the students what the first **action** Antonio took to get what he wants is.

The answer should be: *"He told his father about the letter"*

**NOTE:** All the answers to questions about what action the characters take will be **verbs**. *"He **told** his father..."*

Referring to the **formula** on the board point out that the first **action** has been taken noting that **obstacle** comes next.



## FORMULA FOR MAKING A PLAY (Cont.)

- 7) Ask the students what Antonio's father did to create an **obstacle**?  
This will also be a **verb**.

*"He **told** him he didn't want to hear about it."*

- 8) Continue to improvise the scene and each time Antonio takes another **action** stop and identify the **verb** that describes it. And each time Antonio's father presents another **obstacle** identify the **verb** that describes that.

**NOTE:** The **verbs** should get stronger as the scene progresses.

- 9) As you proceed point out to the students that each time Antonio says something new to convince his father he is taking **new action** and each time his father says something to refute him he is creating **new obstacles**. This process creates **rising action** in the play that should escalate towards a **turning point**.

Point out that this section of the structure;

**Action**  
+  
**Obstacle**  
+  
**New Action**  
+  
**New Obstacle**

is the meat of the play. It is the bulk of what the students will write and will take up most of the play. The more they build the **new action** and **new obstacles** the longer they sustain and build the **conflict**.

# **CREATING CHARACTERS: THE W'S LIST**

## **Lesson**

**AIM:** How do we create characters for our play that have strong emotional wants?

**OBJECTIVE:** To encourage students to create well-rounded, fully developed characters for their plays.

**STUDENTS WILL:** Write a character profile and biography for each of their characters.

### **PROCEDURE:**

1. Write these words in a column on the board:

WHO:	(Character)
WHAT AGE:	
WHAT DOES HE/SHE LOOK LIKE:	
WHERE:	(Setting/Place)
WHEN:	(Time)
WHAT DOES HE/SHE WANT:	(Objective / intention)
WHY DOES HE/SHE WANT IT:	(Motivation)
WHAT DOES HE/SHE DO TO GET IT:	(Action / tactic)
WHAT STANDS IN HIS/HER WAY:	(Obstacle)
WHY IS THIS DAY DIFFERENT:	(Trigger or inciting moment))

2. Brainstorm with the students and come up with a single character and answer all of the questions for that character. The board should look like this:

WHO:	Antonio
WHAT AGE:	A teen-aged boy, a senior in high school

WHAT DOES HE LOOK LIKE:  
He's Latino, tall and athletic with black hair. He wears glasses and is considered good looking.

WHERE:	His father's grocery store in the Bronx.
WHEN:	The present, a winter's day.

WHAT DOES HE WANT: He wants to go away to college.

WHY DOES HE WANT IT No one in his family has gone to college and he wants to make his family proud. He doesn't want to end up like some of his friends who never leave the old neighborhood. He dreams of being a doctor.

WHAT DOES HE DO TO GET IT: He must ask his father's permission and blessing.

WHAT GETS IN HIS WAY: His father does not want him to leave. He always hoped Antonio would take over the family business

WHY IS THIS DAY DIFFERENT: Antonio just received his acceptance letter and he knows he must tell his father about it.

3. Now make the same list for the second character. (Antonio's father)
4. Now you have two characters that the students know fairly well. The important character facts are who they are and what they want. Ask the students to write a detailed biography for each character that includes some of the information:

Hobbies

Beliefs / Values

Education

Family composition

Childhood history

Cultural background

Religious background

Economic situation

Other people who are important to them

5. Have the students share their biographies and compare and contrast the different visions each writer has for these characters.
6. Now ask them to create two characters for their play and go through the same process.

**NOTE:** This activity can be introduced in one lesson but you may want to take several days for writing and sharing time.

# **THE DOLLAR BILL**

## **Lesson**

**AIM:** What is conflict and how does it make a scene or play more interesting?

**OBJECTIVE:** To teach the students the importance of conflict in drama and to demonstrate how a character takes actions to get what they want.

**STUDENTS WILL:** Improvise short scenes that demonstrate a simple external (material) conflict.

### **PROCEDURE:**

- 1) Ask one student to give you dollar bill without refusing.
- 2) Ask the class if this simple interaction or scene was interesting? They should say "NO". Ask them what was missing? They should say "there was no conflict". Explain that this was a scene in which one character took action to get what they wanted and they got it.
- 3) Now secretly instruct the student with the dollar NOT to give you the dollar no matter what you say. Tell the student to come up with as many reasons why he/she cannot give you the dollar.
- 4) Play out the scene once again and keep it going for as long as you can trying a variety of tactics or actions to get the dollar from the student.
- 5) When you've finished a fairly long (5 minute) improvisation ask the class why this second scene was more interesting?
- 6) Ask them to list all the ways your character tried to get the dollar. In other words what were your "actions". The list might include:
  - you asked
  - you begged
  - you bargained
  - you blackmailed
  - you threatened
  - you used guilt to convince
  - you teased.

## **THE DOLLAR BILL (Cont.)**

- 7) Explain to students that your character went through a series of "actions" to get what they wanted and that each time the action increased or became stronger, in other words the arc of the scene increased. We call this **rising action**.
  
- 8) Ask your students to write a short scene in which one character wants something material from another character and they must try at least five different and rising actions. Students may also apply this lesson to the play in process they are working on.
  
- 9) They should also have the second character try five different and rising actions to convince the first character why they cannot give them the dollar.

**NOTE:** The second characters actions will be determined based on their response to the first characters actions. They can resolve the scene in any way they like.

**SUMMARY STATEMENT:** You just wrote scenes where a character takes actions that INCREASE or RISE in order to get a material WANT. The next step will be to connect this material want to an INTERNAL/EMOTIONAL WANT for the character.



# **THE DRAMATIC ARC**

## **Lesson**

**AIM:** What is the DRAMATIC ARC of a play and how can we create NEW or RISING ACTION?

**OBJECTIVE:** To help the students understand how the action of a play must change and intensify as the play progresses towards a CLIMAX and RESOLUTION.

**STUDENTS WILL:** Brainstorm action verbs to be listed on the board for an improvised play and take notes from the board.

### **PROCEDURE:**

- 1) Draw an arc on the board that looks like the one on the following page. Label the top side of the arc Character #1 and the bottom side Character #2 (or use the names of characters)
  
- 2) Set up a scene between two characters that follows the **THE W'S LIST** and **THE FORMULA FOR MAKING A PLAY** ie: two characters that have **wants** and take **action** to get what they want. You can use **The Dollar Bill Improvisation** you just demonstrated.
  
3. Set up a **trigger** or **inciting moment**.

#### **Example:**

Antonio: wants to go to college. Dreams of becoming a doctor  
Antonio's father: wants his son to take over the family business because he is getting old and dreams of his legacy lasting for years.

**Inciting moment:** Antonio receives a letter of acceptance from a college out of state.

**Action:** Antonio must reveal to his father that he has secretly applied to college and ask his permission to go.

4. Ask the students what are all the actions Antonio can take as he confronts his father to get what he wants. For every **action** Antonio takes there will be a response from his father which are his **actions** to get what **he wants** too. These become Antonio's

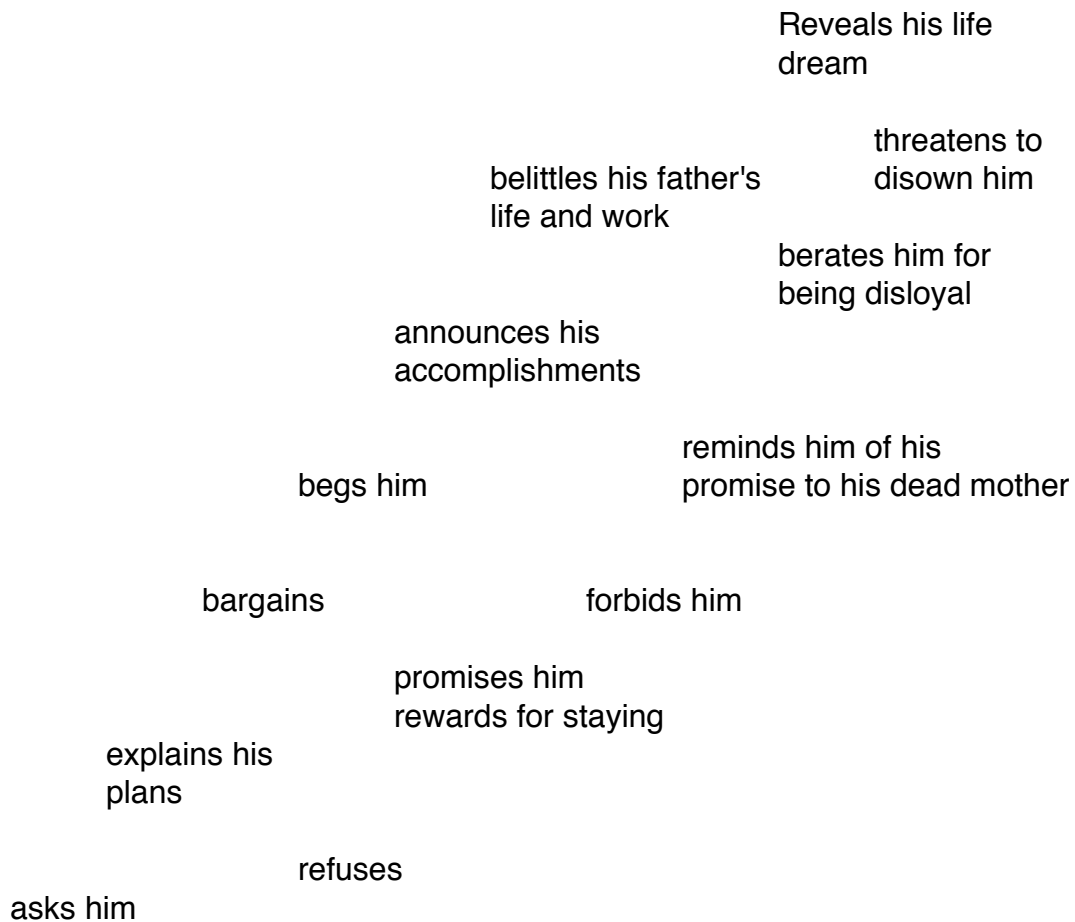
**obstacles.**

## THE DRAMATIC ARC (Cont.)

**NOTE:** The answers you want from the students will be in the form of **verbs** and each verb should get stronger as the scene progresses.

5. List each of the verbs/actions along the arc for each character noting that the verbs intensify as they move up the arc.

The Dramatic Arc on the board should look like this:



**NOTE:** As a preface to this lesson ask your students to make a **VERB LIST** using a dictionary or thesaurus. Have them make lists of **action verbs**. They can use this list when doing their DRAMATIC ARC

# **THE COVER PAGE**

## **Sample**

Students should create a **cover page** for their play that looks like this:

**TITLE**

by

Student Name

### **CHARACTERS:**

Antonio, a teen-aged boy, Tall, dark hair, wears glasses. Is popular and does well in school. He wants to go to college and dreams of being a doctor. He has always had a troubled relationship with his father.

Antonio's father, mid forties, hard working rugged man. Own his own hardware store. he is a strict, overbearing parent. He has always hoped that his son would take over his business someday.

**TIME:** The present. Mid-afternoon on a spring day

**PLACE:** The kitchen of their apartment in the Hunt's Point section of the Bronx. The kitchen is small but well appointed. A small wooden table is at the center with a window above the sink looking out at other buildings. Very little light comes in the room. There are boxes of tools and hardware piled up near the door.

A large picture of Puerto Rico hangs on the wall.

**AT RISE:** Antonio's father sits at the table looking tired and upset. He is opening bills. Antonio walks in from school with his back-pack looking nervous. He is holding a letter.

## **FORMULA FOR MAKING A PLAY : PART TWO** **CRISIS / TURNING POINT / CLIMAX**

### **Lesson**

**AIM:** What is a **crisis** or **turning point** in a play and how does it create a **climax**?

**OBJECTIVE:** To help students understand how conflicts build towards a **climax** which is caused by a major event that is a crisis or turning point in the play..

**STUDENTS WILL:** Brainstorm and write out possible events that would create a crisis or turning point in their play.

- 1) Select a student play as a model and read it in class.
- 2) Once the conflict has been developed to a point where the characters seem to be at a stalemate introduce the idea of **crisis** or **turning point**. Brainstorm possible events that could create a crisis or a turning point for the characters.

#### **Examples:**

- \* One of the characters says something devastating to the other.
  - \* One of the characters reveals a secret that has a crushing impact on the other.
  - \* One of the characters presents an ultimatum or threat forcing the other to make a final decision.
  - \* One of the characters resorts to physical action (like a slap) which stops the action and provokes one or both of them to change course.
- 3) After the class establishes the **crisis** or **turning point** and you have improvised it brainstorm possible **responses** or "fall out" .

Ask the students:

*"Is what just happened in the scene enough to make one or both of the characters change their mind and give into the other?"*

Take their responses and improvise the lines that follow the **crisis/turning point**.

This section of dialogue is the **climax**. The climax is the character's **response** to and the **action** that immediately follows the **crisis/turning point**.

**FORMULA FOR MAKING A PLAY: PART TWO (Cont.)**

- 3) Ask the students to write out three possible events that could cause a crisis or turning point for their own plays.

**NOTE:** Using first drafts of the students plays in process to demonstrate this formula is a great way to teach this lesson while work-shopping the student's plays.

## **WORK-SHOPPING THE PLAYS**

Once the students have written a first draft of their play up to but not including the climax and resolution it is important to read the plays aloud and discuss what works and what needs work. This process is called **Work-shopping the plays** and it is the focus of the remainder of the residency. It can be a challenging process because it calls upon us to use our intuition and "gut reactions" to provide feedback and assess how well the writers have used the tools we have taught. There is no set formula for responding to plays in process, but there are some things we can do to facilitate a useful and concrete discussion. Setting up some consistent rituals like these will help:

1. The writer should provide four copies of their play for in-class readings. 1 copy for each of the two characters; 1 copy for you to read stage directions and 1 copy for the writer.
2. The writer should take notes in the margin of their play during the reading and discussion.
3. The writer should introduce the play and the characters and explain any problems they're having continuing the play. For example: "I don't know how to build the conflict" or "I'm stuck and don't know what to do next".
4. Give the class some responsibilities during the reading by asking some focus questions before the reading, like "Listen to the play to see if the writer established and built a strong conflict" or "Look for lines that express the emotional wants of the characters". Questions like these encourage the class to be active listeners and to look at the reading through a specific lens.
5. Students often feel that there is nothing to learn from someone else's reading. They only pay attention if their play is being read. Ask them to take notes about strengths or weaknesses they see in someone else's play that are similar to those in their own play.

After the readings use the following **Focus Questions** to facilitate a discussion. Focus the discussion on the skill you want to demonstrate that day. For example if the lesson is about **conflict** make your questions about that. You should also improvise or re-read the play using the suggestions from the class. Set up a system of "democratic" writing where the entire class helps the writer by offering lines and ideas. The writer has the option of using only the suggestions he or she wants to.

