



PLAYWRITING MASTER CLASS

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HOW TO STRUCTURE LONGER PLAYS

- Write out beats/units into plot points. Write each unit on a card, then spread them out. Rearrange to experiment with structure, especially in nonlinear work. Your play may not necessarily require naturalism and a traditional linear plot.
- Character Biographies: begin with character breakdown. Actors are trained to analyze lines to find what each character says and what others say about the character. Playwrights work the opposite way: create a backstory or bio for each character. Write this out to help feed a longer play.
- Arc of intentions = character objectives. In a longer play, objectives change. More hidden nuanced objectives appear.
- Creating a spreadsheet may help to track writing objectives.

HOW TO STRUCTURE A SCENE

Ask: when does the scene begin? Don't assume what would happen in real life must be included on stage. Look for the debate, the fight, and try starting there.

Ask: where does the scene end? Perhaps end on a question.

IMAGERY

Write a scene with all dialogue, then strip to basic actions (ie, an actor "verbing" the lines—what is the basic verb of each line?). This helps to clarify opportunities for imagery in response to the verb.

DEVELOPMENT

Two levels of play development:

1. Workshop development – revising content, structure, intricacies. What's working and what's not.
2. Production development – polishing the text, preparing for performance.

Jeff writes three versions of a scene to try out with actors in a workshop situation. He listens to the differences and asks for feedback. This helps him to clarify intentions for each scene.

PRESENT TENSE

Writing in the present tense allows the character to discover something in the moment. It creates suspense for the audience, who also discovers it in the moment. If a story is told in past tense

(like much fiction), then we know the character has survived; if told in the present tense, we don't know.

SPECTACLE: TIME & SPACE

In a film, the editor creates the story through cuts and finesse.

In theatre, the story is created new every night by the actors.

STAGE DIRECTIONS

Write what you need to say. (See for example Brecht's playwright notes.)

Include stage images that are not related to character.

Do not include line readings for the actor or blocking.

Articulate the mood or image if it is crucial to the play.

DRAMATURGE

In order to develop your script, you may seek the services of a professional dramaturge. Finding the right one is like online dating. Check LMDA (Literary Dramaturgs and Managers of the Americas) at <https://lmda.org/> for listing of dramaturges (including Canadian) and their fees. Request help based on your needs. Reach out after you have a draft.

You might send the same draft to several dramaturges (at once or in succession) in order to compare their responses.

Remember that every collaborator's personal taste impacts the project. This is why we limit the number of interactions due to our time frame.

FEEDBACK

When providing feedback on a play, phrase every comment as a question. (When you ask others for feedback, ask them to phrase every comment as a question.) *Prescribing solutions is damaging to the work.

EXPLORATION

In a fight scene, look for a moment of tenderness in the scene. Open up options. In a gentler scene, look for a moment of anger. Look for what surprises you, what is unexpected.

WRITING EXERCISE

CHARACTER BIO

For each character, determine the following parameters:

- Age in the play (*important)
- What made them the happiest in their life
- What was hardest in their life
- What are their extreme emotions—these are anchors that people remember
- What makes the character laugh
- One piece of music associated with the character (use this as a touchstone)
- Physical details: how do they carry themselves? What do they wear? What shoes do they wear?