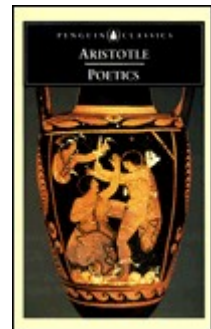


DGAA INTRODUCTION TO PLAYWRITING a five-part course for writers and writers' groups

Who's it for?

Writers new to drama, and particularly writers from other backgrounds who want a good grasp of the differences between playwriting and other forms of narrative, and the usual terminology. You'll find it especially useful if you usually write fiction or poetry, and have little experience of acting or directing.



What'll I learn?

The main elements of drama set out in Aristotle's *Poetics*, including story (plot), character, theme, dialogue and spectacle. How playwriting is very different to other kinds of writing, and how to make a start.

Any last-minute advice?

Read plays. See them. Watch films and TV. Look out for what moves you, excites you, bores you, annoys you. Start noticing what makes drama tick. Ask 'why', and try things out.

Starting to write:

If you've never written before, you need to find out what works for you. Try the following:

Carry a notebook at all times. Jot down sights, sounds, images, overheard conversation. Eavesdrop shamelessly. This gets you into the habit of thinking like a writer, and can become a useful store of inspiration over time.

Free writing. Limber up by writing non-stop and non-critically for a few minutes each day. The aim isn't to produce a publishable piece of writing or even a draft, but to help fire up your brain and pull focus. Writing is often an act of discovery, and the difficult part is often just starting. Many writers don't know the specifics of what they're going to write until they write it.

Brainstorm. Pick a random object, place or photo and quickly write down twenty possible ideas for a story. Brainstorming and 'what if' scenarios are useful for getting out of a rut. It's usually more helpful to write your way out of a difficulty by trying different things (or go for a walk!), than to sit staring into space for hours.

WORKSHEET ONE: STORY

Exercise 1:

Write a 3-4-page scene in which there are two characters, and the first character wants a book from the second. The details of the scene – setting, time, characters - are entirely up to you.

(adapted from *The Playwright's Guidebook*, Stuart Spencer, 2002)

Having written your first scene, let's look at what's actually needed to create a scene – a basic unit of dramatic action.

Characters: The people whose story we're following. Can't have a play without them! It's a basic human drive to be curious about other beings and wonder what they'll do next. Characters exploit this and provide our entry point into the play.

Action: Characters do things. Things happen in a play – that's obvious enough. But, as Stuart Spencer¹ says, dramatic action *'is not physical activity. It is not characters moving about the stage... fight scenes, or dances... Action is what a character wants.'* David Mamet² goes as far as to say: 'That which the hero requires *is* the play'. Which brings us to...

Wants: Characters with wants make a scene go somewhere. Without that momentum, scenes don't have a dramatic shape. The actor's question 'what's my motivation?' is asked with very good reason – actors need to understand what's driving their characters through the scene. Wants may appear to be something small (like a book, a drink), but are usually a focus for an underlying emotional charge: (love, longing, fear, revenge...).

However, once characters get what they want, the scene is over. Momentum is gone. Which brings us to...

Conflict: Conflict in drama is a structural device. It doesn't mean a big fight or argument. It can often be quite small and subtle. Basically, conflict is created by setting up an obstacle to a character's 'want'. If they can't get what they want, they are forced to try different tactics and negotiate with other characters who want different things. If, on the other hand, your characters want exactly the same thing, there's little scope for conflict, and your scene can lack momentum.

What is story?

Story, plot, narrative... the different genres make technical distinctions between the terms, but the basic meaning is the same: events, and the connections between them.

Backstory refers to events that have already happened before the story begins.

Flashback or **flashforward** means parts of the story which interrupt an otherwise chronological sequence.

1 Stuart Spencer, *The Playwright's Guidebook* (2002). Insightful, practical, thoughtful.

2 David Mamet, *Three Uses of the Knife* (1998). On the nature and purpose of drama.

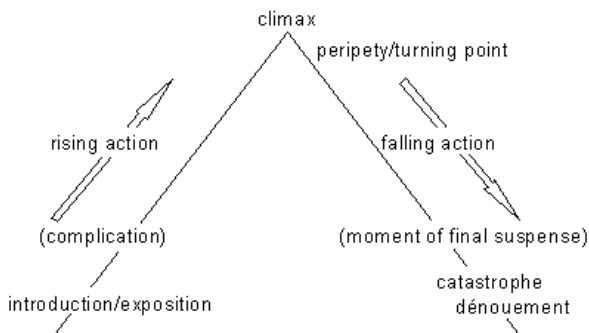
Often conflict focuses on an external situation or object, eg your characters negotiate over a book, as in the scene you wrote above. Or they act upon each other (persuasion, threats, affection, revelation...).

Characters can also be internally conflicted. However, internal conflict needs careful thought if it is to be made theatrically interesting. Hamlet's soliloquy, 'To be or not to be', is a famous example of how to convey a character at war with himself. Think also of the dual-natured Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings* film. But in general, plays tend to show the workings of the external world (see box).

Scenes and bigger structures:

Once you've looked at the beats of a scene (see exercise 2), you may get a sense of an emerging pattern.

The basic shape of a play and a scene is the same: it starts small, builds and subsides. Aristotle described this shape in his *Poetics*, but it is actually pretty intuitive: your audience are more likely to stay hooked if you start with small moments full of intrigue and build to bigger things. The German critic Gustav Freytag set out this general shape in his schematic pyramid (below).



Comparing Genres: Inner vs Outer Worlds

The natural domain of drama is the outer world, ie character and story revealed through external action.

Fiction is traditionally better at handling the inner life: they can move easily between 1st and 3rd person, into different character viewpoints, and zoom around in time and space very fluidly, mimicking the non-linear action of the human brain. **Fiction** can more easily place you inside another consciousness - this is its great strength.

Film versions of novels

often use voiceover because it's the easiest way to convey a character's inner life, and echo the narrative voice of the book. Film and theatre can more easily provoke a direct visceral and sensory response that bypasses analysis. It's worth bearing in mind that the different genres have different propensities and considering which is best for your story.

Exercise 2:

Read a scene from a playscript and work out what each character wants, and what is standing in their way. Now mark the scene into 'beats' or emotional shifts – what Spencer describes as the '*atom of the dramaturgical world*': the smallest possible unit of dramatic writing. This is a point when the power, status, mood or tactics between the characters changes. It might be a moment of revelation which changes their relationship. Or it might be simply be a moment in a speech when one character defers to another – whether through speech or silence.

Now, choose one of these shift points and explain what's going on. Describe how the emotional charge changes in that moment.

Later influential story theorists such as Robert McKee³ draw on a similar model. And if you look closely at the beats of a scene, you'll find that they, too, have this structure: build, change, build, change. This probably ties in with the psychology of attention: what keeps us interested? When does a pattern become predictable and need interruption? How can our focus be held and refreshed? Obviously these things can't and shouldn't be codified, but it's interesting to note that this general shape seems to work at every level of dramatic structure.

Exercise 3:

Mark up your own scene into beats, to get a good look at its structure. What discoveries do you make? For example, you might find you have several beats in a single speech, and consider placing them further apart. Are the characters moving through a range of emotions too quickly? Can you reorder the beats so that they build towards the most powerful moment in the scene?

Tip: It's useful to read scripts with a pencil in hand, as it helps you map the emotional structure of the play more clearly. Directors often mark up scripts in this way for rehearsal. Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre sells recent Scottish playscripts for half the normal price. You can also pick up second-hand playscripts very cheaply on Amazon.

Writing and reading plays:

It goes without saying that the only real test of whether a play works is in performance, in a space, with an audience. Drama is a living, collaborative medium, and it's vital to experiment, and try things out. Often published playscripts are different from the performed versions because directors and writers make last-minute changes once they've seen the play in front of an audience at preview.

So playscripts are woefully incomplete documents: part blueprint, part record. That said, it's vital to read as many as you can, to exercise your writer's imagination. By filling in all the missing aspects of the performance – sights, sounds, moods, pace – you learn to think more visually and spatially, and more like a director or performer. This will be a huge help to your writing.

What's more, contemporary playwrights are finding new ways of expressing performance on the page – layouts, typographical conventions – so it's interesting to read plays as well as see them performed. Even a flick through a playscript will tell you something about the texture of the play – pace, the prominence of the characters, their articulacy, register, and so on.

Further work on story:

Take a well-known fairy tale and break it down into scenes. Draw the structure as a timeline, noting its rising and falling action. See if you can spot reversals or moments of dramatic change in the characters.

COMING UP NEXT: TIME

3 Robert McKee, *Story* (1998). A screenwriters' in-depth take on Aristotle.