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WRITING
ABOUT A PLAY

The play was a great success,
but the audience was a total failure.

—OSCAR WILDE

What You Will Learn in This Chapter

- To read a play critically
- To write a review of a play
- To quote a play

Writing about a play you've read is similar, in many ways, to writing about poetry or fiction. If your subject is a play you have actually seen performed, however, some differences will quickly become apparent. Although, like a story or a poem, a play in print is usually the work of a single author, a play on stage may be the joint effort of seventy or eighty people—actors, director, costumeers, set designers, and technicians. Though a play on the page stays fixed and changeless, a play in performance changes in many details from season to season—and even from night to night.

Later in this chapter you will find advice on reviewing a performance of a play, as you might do for a class assignment or for publication in a campus newspaper. In a literature course, though, you will probably write about the plays you quietly read and behold only in the theater of your mind.

READ CRITICALLY

- Read the whole play—not just the dialogue, but also everything in *italics*, including stage directions and descriptions of settings. The meaning of a scene, or even of an entire play, may depend on the tone of voice in which an actor is supposed to deliver a significant line. At the end of *A Doll's House*, for example, we need to pay attention to how Helmer's last line is spoken—“*A hope flashes across his mind*”—if we are to understand that Nora ignores his last desperate hope for reconciliation when she closes the door. The meaning of a line may depend upon the actions described in the stage directions. If Nora did not leave the house or close the door, but hesitated at Helmer's last line, the meaning of the play would be slightly different.

- Highlight key passages and take notes as you read. Later you will want to quote or refer to important moments in the play, and marking those moments will simplify your job. Following is an example of a student's notes on a key scene in

Mrs. Peters (to the other woman): Oh, her fruit, it did freeze. (To the County Attorney) She worried about that when it turned so cold. She said the fire'd go out and her jars would break.

Sheriff: Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worryin' about her preserves.

County Attorney: I guess before we're through she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about.

Hale: Well, women are used to worrying over trifles.

(The two women move a little closer together.)

County Attorney (with the gallantry of a young politician): And yet, but for all their worries, what would we do without the ladies?

(The women do not unbend.) He goes to the sink, takes a dipperful

of water from the pail and pouring it into a basin, washes his hands. Starts to wipe them on the roller towel, turns it for a

cleaner place.) Dirty towels! (Kicks his foot against the pans under the sink.) Not much of a housekeeper, would you say, ladies?

Mrs. Hale (stiffly): There's a great deal of work to be done on a farm.

She holds back, but she's mad.

The two women are buying it. Courtesy toward but condescending.

Bit of Hale (stiffly): There's a great deal of work to be done on a farm.

Play's title. Significant words? The men miss the "clues"—too trifling.

- If your subject is a play in verse—such as those by Sophocles and Shakespeare—keep track of act, scene, and line numbers as you take notes. This will help to easily relocate any text you want to refer to or quote.

Iago's hypocrisy is apparent in his speech defending his good name (3.3.168–74).

COMMON APPROACHES TO WRITING ABOUT DRAMA

The methods commonly used to write about fiction and poetry—for example, explanation, analysis, or comparison and contrast—are all well suited to writing about drama. These methods are discussed in depth in earlier chapters. Here are a few

Explication Paper

A whole play is too much to cover in an ordinary explication, a line-by-line unfolding of meaning in a literary work. In drama, explication is best suited to brief passages—a key soliloquy, for example, or a moment of dialogue that lays bare the play's theme. Closely examining a critical moment in a play can shed light on the play in its entirety. To be successful, an explication needs to concentrate on a passage probably not much more than 20 lines long.

Analysis Paper

A separation of a literary work into elements, analysis is a very useful method for writing about drama. To write an analysis, choose a single element in a play—for example, animal imagery in some speeches from *Ohello*, or the theme of fragility in *The Glass Menagerie*. Plays certainly offer many choices of elements for analysis: characters, themes, tone, irony, imagery, figures of speech, and symbols, for example. Keep in mind, though, that not all plays contain the same elements you would find in poetry or fiction. Few plays have a narrator, and in most cases the point of view is that of the audience, which perceives the events not through a narrator's eyes but through its own. And while we might analyze a short story's all-pervading style, a play might contain as many styles as there are speaking characters. (Noteworthy exceptions do exist, though: you might argue that in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, both main characters speak the same language.) As for traditional poetic devices such as metaphor and metrical pattern, they may be found in plays such as *Ohello*, but not in most contemporary plays, in which the dialogue tends to sound like ordinary conversation.

Comparison and Contrast Analysis

The method of comparison and contrast involves setting two plays side by side and pointing out their similarities and differences. Because plays are complicated entities, you need to choose a narrow focus, or you will find yourself overwhelmed. A profound topic—"The Self-Deception of *Ohello* and *Oedipus*"—might do for a three-hundred-page dissertation, but an essay of a mere thousand words could never do it justice. A large but finite topic—say, attitudes toward marriage in *A Doll's House* and *Trifles*—would best suit a long-term paper. To apply this method to a shorter-term paper, you might compare and contrast a certain aspect of personality in two characters within the same play—for example, Troy's and Cory's ambitions in *Fences*.

Card Report

In place of an essay, some instructors like to assign a card report, a succinct but thorough method of analyzing the components of a play. For more information on this kind of assignment, see "The Card Report" in Chapter 40. Keep in mind, though, that when dealing with a play, you will find some elements that differ from those in a short story. Specifying the work's narrator may not be relevant to a play, for example. Also, for a full-length play, you may need to write on both sides of two 5- x 8-inch index cards instead of on one card, as you might for a short story. Still, in order to write a good card report, you have to be both brief

and specific. Before you start, sort out your impressions of the play and decide which characters, scenes, and lines of dialogue are the most memo and important. Reducing your scattered impressions to essentials, you will to reexamine what you have read. When you finish, you will know the play more thoroughly.

Here is an example: a card report on Susan Glaspell's one-act play *Trifle* including only the elements that seemed most important, the writer manages to analyze the brief play on the front and back of one card. Still, he managed to write a few pertinent quotations to give a sense of the play's remarkable language. Although the report does not say everything about Glaspell's little masterpiece, an adequate criticism of the play could hardly be much briefer. For this report, the writer assigned to include the following:

1. The playwright's name, nationality, and dates.
2. The title of the play and the date of its first performance.
3. The central character or characters, with a brief description that includes leading traits.
4. Other characters, also described.
5. The scene or scenes and, if the play does not take place in the present, time of its action.
6. The dramatic question. This question is whatever the play leads us to ourselves: some conflict whose outcome we wonder about, some uncertainty whose resolution we look forward to.
7. A brief summary of the play's principal events, in the order in which playwright presents them. If you are reporting on a play longer than *Trifle*, you may find it simplest to sum up what happens in each act, perhaps each scene.
8. The tone of the play, as best you can detect it. Try to describe playwright's apparent feelings toward the characters or what happens to them.
9. The language spoken in the play. Try to describe it: Does any character speak with a choice of words or with figures of speech that strike you as unusual, distinctive, poetic—or maybe dull and drab? Does language indicate character's background or place of birth? Brief quotations, in what space you have, will be valuable.
10. A one-sentence summary of the play's central theme. If you find none, say "Plays often contain more than one theme. Which of them seems most clear borne out by the main events?"
11. Any symbols you notice and believe to be important. Try to state in a few words what each suggests.
12. A concise evaluation of the play. What did you think of it? (For more suggestions on being a drama critic, see Chapter 37, "Evaluating a Play.")

Here is a card report on *Trifles*.

Front of Card

Ben Nelson

Susan Glaspell, American, 1876–1948

Trifles, 1916

English 101

Central characters: Mrs. Peters, the sheriff's nervous wife, dutiful but

independent, not "married to the law"—whose sorrows make her able to sympathize with a woman accused of murder. Mrs. Hale, who knows the accused, more decisive.

Other characters: The County Attorney, self-important but short-sighted. The

Sheriff, a man of only middling intelligence, another sexist. Hale, a farmer, a cautious man. Not seen on stage, two others are central: Minnie (Foster) Wright, the accused, a music lover reduced to near despair by years of grim marriage and isolation; and John Wright, the victim, known for his cruelty.

Scene: The kitchen of a gloomy farmhouse after the arrest of a wife on suspicion of murder; little things left in disarray.

Major dramatic question: Why did Minnie Wright kill her husband? When this question is answered, a new major dramatic question is raised: Will Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale cover up incriminating evidence?

Events: In the exposition, Sheriff and C.A., investigating the death of Wright, hear Hale tell how he found the body and a distracted Mrs. Wright. Then (1) C.A. starts looking for a motive. (2) His jeering at Mrs. Wright (and all women) for their concern with "trifles" causes Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale to rally to the woman's defense. (3) When the two women find evidence that Mrs. Wright had panicked (a patch of wild sewing in a quilt), Mrs. Hale destroys it. (4) Mrs. Peters finds more evidence: a wrecked birdcage. (5) The women find a canary with its neck wrung and realize that Minnie killed her husband in a similar way. (6) The women align themselves with Minnie when Mrs. Peters recalls her own sorrows, and Mrs. Hale decides her own failure to visit Minnie was "a crime." (7) The C.A. unwittingly provides Mrs. Peters with a means to smuggle out the canary. (8) The two women unite to seize the evidence.

[continued on back of card]

Back of Card

Tone: Made clear in the women's dialogue: mingled horror and sadness at what happened, compassion for a fellow woman, smoldering resentment toward men who crush women.

Language: The plain speech of farm people, with a dash of rural Midwestern slang (*red-up* for tidy; Hale's remark that the accused was "kind of done up"). Unschooled speech: Mrs. Hale says *ain't*—and yet her speech rises at moments to simple poetry: "She used to sing. He killed that too." Glaspell hints at the self-importance of the County Attorney by his heavy reliance on the first person.

Central theme: Women, in their supposed concern for trifles, see more deeply than men do.

Symbols: The broken birdcage and the dead canary, both suggesting the music and the joy that John Wright stifled in Minnie.

Evaluation: A powerful, successful, realistic play that conveys its theme with great economy—in its views, more than fifty years ahead of its time.

A Drama Review

Writing a play review, a brief critical account of an actual performance, involves going out on a limb and making an evaluation. It also can mean assessing various aspects of the production, including the acting, direction, sets, costumes, lighting and possibly even the play itself. While reviews can be challenging to write, many students find them more stimulating—even more fun—than most writing assignments. There is no better way to understand—and appreciate—drama than by seeing it theater. Here are some tips for writing a review.

■ **Clarify what you are evaluating.** Is it the play's script, or the performance? the latter, are you concentrating on the performance in its entirety, or on certain elements, such as the acting or the direction? If the play is a classic one, the more urgent task for the reviewer will be not to evaluate the playwright's work but comment on the success of the actors', directors', and production crew's particular interpretation of it. If the play is newer and less well established, you may profitably evaluate the script itself.

■ **If the play itself is your subject, be aware of the conventions within which the playwright is working.** For a list of considerations see "Judging a Play"

- **Don't simply sneer or gush; give reasons for your opinions.** Ground your praise or criticism of a production in specifics. Incidentally, harsh evaluations can tempt a reviewer to flashes of wit. One celebrated flash was writer Eugene Field's observation of an actor in a production of *King Lear*, that "he played the king as though he were in constant fear that someone else was about to play the ace." The comment isn't merely nasty; it implies that Field had closely watched the actor's performance and had discerned what was wrong with it.
- **Early in the review, provide the basic facts.** Give the play's title and author, the theatrical company producing it, and the theater in which it is performed.
- **Give the names of actors in lead roles, and evaluate their performances.** How well cast do the leads seem? If an actor stands out—for good or ill—in a supporting role, he or she may deserve a mention as well.
- **Provide a brief plot summary.** Your reader may be unacquainted with the play, and will certainly want a general sense of what it is about. Out of consideration to the reader, however, it is best not to reveal any plot surprises, unless the play is a classic one with an ending likely to be common knowledge.
- **If the play is unfamiliar, summarize its theme.** This exercise will not only help your reader understand your review but probably sharpen your analysis.
- **For a well-known play, evaluate the director's approach to familiar material.** Is the production exactly what you'd expect, or are there any fresh and apparently original innovations? If a production is unusual, does it achieve newness by violating the play? The director of one college production of *Othello* emphasized the play's being partly set in Venice by staging it in the campus swimming pool, with actors floating on barges and a homemade gondola—a fresh, but not entirely successful, innovation.
- **Comment on the director's work.** Can you discern the director's approach to the play? Do the actors hurry their lines or speak too slowly? Do they speak and gesture naturally, or in an awkward, stylized manner? Are these touches effective or distracting?
- **Pay attention to costumes, sets, and lighting.** Though such matters may seem small, they have an effect on the play's overall tone.
- **Finally, to prepare yourself, read a few professional play reviews.** Reviews appear regularly in magazines such as the *New Yorker*, *Time*, the *New Criterion*, and *American Theatre*, and also on the entertainment pages of most metropolitan newspapers. Newspaper reviews can often be accessed online; for example, *New York Times* reviews may be found at theater.nytimes.com.

Here is a good, concise review of an amateur production of *Trifles*, as it might be written for a college newspaper or as a course assignment.

Trifles Scores Mixed Success in
Monday Players' Production

Women have come a long way since 1916. At least, that impression was conveyed yesterday when the Monday Players presented Susan Glaspell's classic one-act play *Trifles* in Alpaugh Theater.

At first, in Glaspell's taut story of two subjugated farm women who figure out why a fellow farm woman strangled her husband, actors Lloyd Fox and Cal Federici get to strut around. As a small-town sheriff and a county attorney, they lord it over the womenfolk, making sexist remarks about women in general. Fox and Federici obviously enjoy themselves as the pompous types that Glaspell means them to be.

But of course it is the women with their keen eyes for small details who prove the superior detectives. In the demanding roles of the two Nebraska Miss Marples, Kathy Betts and Ruth Fine cope as best they can with what is asked of them. Fine is especially convincing. As Mrs. Hale, a friend of the wife accused of the murder, she projects a growing sense of independence. Visibly smarting under the verbal lashes of the menfolk, she seems to straighten her spine inch by inch as the play goes on.

Unluckily for Betts, director Alvin Klein seems determined to view Mrs. Peters as a comedian. Though Glaspell's stage directions call the woman "nervous," I doubt she is supposed to be quite so fidgety as Betts makes her. Betts vibrates like a tuning fork every time a new clue turns up, and when she is obliged to smell a dead canary bird (another clue), you would think she was whiffing a dead hippopotamus. Mrs. Peters, whose sad past includes a lost baby and a kitten some maniac chopped up with a hatchet, is no figure of fun to my mind. Played for laughs, her character fails to grow visibly on stage, as Fine makes Mrs. Hale grow.

Klein, be it said in his favor, makes the quiet action proceed at a brisk pace. Feminists in the audience must have been a little embarrassed, though, by his having Betts and Fine deliver every speech defending women in an extra-loud voice. After all, Glaspell makes her points clearly enough just by showing us what she shows. Not everything is overstated, however. As a farmer who found the murder victim, Ron Valdez acts his part with quiet authority.

Despite flaws in its direction, this powerful play still spellbinds an audience. Anna Winterbright's set, seen last week as a background for *Dracula* and just slightly touched up, provides appropriate gloom.

Open
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End
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Anal-
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Further
on stag

Overall

HOW TO QUOTE A PLAY

The guidelines for quoting prose or poetry generally apply to quoting from a play. Plays present certain challenges of their own, however. When you quote an extended section of a play or dialogue that involves more than one character, use the following MLA format to set the passage off from the body of your paper:

- Indent half an inch.
- Type the character's name in all capitals, followed by a period.
- If a speech runs for more than a single line, indent any additional lines one quarter inch.
- Provide a citation reference:

If the play is written in prose, provide a page number and the scene or act number.

If the play is written in verse, provide the act, scene, and line numbers.

Here is an example of that format:

The men never find a motive for the murder because, ironically, they consider all the real clues "trifles" that don't warrant their attention:

SHERIFF. Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worryin' about her preserves.

COUNTY ATTORNEY. I guess before we're through she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about.

HALE. Well, women are used to worrying over trifles. (853; act 1)

When you are quoting a verse play, be careful to respect the line breaks. For citation references, you should provide the act, scene, and line numbers, so that your reader will be able to find the quotation in any edition of the play. A quotation from a verse play should look like this:

Even before her death, Othello will not confront Desdemona with his specific suspicions:

OTHELLO. Think on thy sins.

DESDEMONA.

They are loves I bear to you.

OTHELLO. Ay, and for that thou diest.

DESDEMONA. That death's unnatural that kills for loving.

Alas, why gnaw you so your nether lip?

Some bloody passion shakes your very frame!

These are portents; but yet I hope, I hope,

They do not point on me. (5.2.42-48)

TOPICS FOR WRITING BRIEF PAPERS (250-500 WORDS)

1. Analyze a key character from any play in this book. Some choices might be Tom Wirt in *The Glass Menagerie*, Torvald Helmer in *A Doll's House*, or Troy Maxson in *Fences*. What motivates that character? Point to specific moments in the play to make your case.
2. When the curtain comes down on the conclusion of some plays, the audience is left to decide exactly what finally happened. In a short informal essay, state your interpretation of the conclusion of one of these plays: *The Sound of a Voice*, *El Santo Americano*, *The Glass Menagerie*. Don't just give a plot summary; tell what you think the conclusion means.
3. Sum up the main suggestions you find in one of these meaningful objects (or action the handkerchief in *Othello*, the Christmas tree in *A Doll's House* (or Nora's doing a waltz in *Menagerie*); Troy's work on the fence in *Fences*, Laura's collection of figurines in *The Glass Menagerie*).
4. Here is an exercise in being terse. Write a card report on a short, one-scene play (other than *Trifles*), and confine your remarks to both sides of one 5- x 8-inch card. Possible subjects include *The Sound of a Voice*, *Pomp and Circumstance*, and *Soap Opera*.
5. Attend a play and write a review. In an assignment this brief, you will need to concentrate your remarks on either the performance or the script itself. Be sure to back up your opinion with specific observations.

TOPICS FOR WRITING MORE EXTENDED PAPERS (600-1,000 WORDS)

1. From a play you have enjoyed, choose a passage that strikes you as difficult, worth reading closely. Try to pick a passage not longer than about 20 lines. Explicate it—give it a close sentence-by-sentence reading—and explain how this small part of the play relates to the whole. For instance, any of the following passages might be considered memorable (as essential to their plays):
 - Othello's soliloquy beginning "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul" (*Othello* 5.2.1-22).
 - Oedipus to Teiresias, speech beginning "Wealth, sovereignty and skill" (*Oedipus at King*, 418-45).
 - Nora to Mrs. Linde, speech beginning "Yes, someday, maybe, in many years when I am not as pretty as I am now" (*A Doll's House*, page 1085).
2. Analyze the complexities and contradictions to be found in a well-rounded character from a play of your choice. Some good subjects might be Othello, Nora Helmer (in *A Doll's House*), or Tom Wingfield (in *The Glass Menagerie*).
3. Take just a single line or sentence from a play, one that stands out for some reason greatly important. Perhaps it states a theme, reveals a character, or serves as a crisis (turning point). Write an essay demonstrating its importance—how it functions, why it is necessary. Some possible lines include:
 - Iago to Roderigo: "I am not what I am" (*Othello*, 1.1.67).
 - Amanda to Tom: "You live in a dream; you manufacture illusions!" (*The Glass Menagerie* Scene vii).
 - Bono to Cory and Troy: "Some people build fences to keep people out . . . and other people build fences to keep people in" (*Fences*, Act II, Scene i).
4. Write an analysis essay in which you single out an element of a play for examination—character, plot, setting, theme, dramatic irony, tone, language, symbolism, conventions, or any other element. Try to relate this element to the play as a whole. Sample topics: "The Function of Teiresias in *Oedipus the King*," "Imagery of Poison in *Othello*," "William's Use of Masochism in *The Glass Menagerie*," "The Theme of Masculinity in *Fences*."

- How would you stage an updated production of a play by Shakespeare, Sophocles, or Ibsen, transplanting it to our time? Choose a play, and describe the challenges and difficulties of this endeavor. How would you overcome them—or, if they cannot be overcome, why not?
- Louis Phillips, of the School of Visual Arts in New York City, developed the following assignment. Read this statement from Woody Allen:

Sports to me is like music. It's completely satisfying. There were times I would sit at a game with the old Knicks and think to myself in the fourth quarter, this is everything the theatre should be and isn't. There's an outcome that's unpredictable. The audience is not ahead of the dramatists. The drama is ahead of the audience.

What does Allen mean by the notion of the audience being ahead of (or behind) the dramatist? Apply that to a play you have read. If Woody Allen feels that sports is more satisfying than drama, why does he continue to make movies?

TOPICS FOR WRITING LONG PAPERS (1,500 WORDS OR MORE)

- Choose a play you admire from this book, and read a second play by the same author. Compare and contrast the two plays with attention to a single element—a theme they have in common, or a particular kind of imagery, for example.
- Read *Othello* and view a movie version of the play. You might choose Oliver Parker's 1995 take on the play with Laurence Fishburne and Kenneth Branagh, or even *O* (2001), an updated version that has a prep school as its setting and a basketball star as its protagonist. Review the movie. What does it manage to convey of the original? What gets lost in the translation?
- Choosing any of the works in "Plays for Further Reading" or taking some other play your instructor suggests, report any difficulties you encountered in reading and responding to it. Explicate any troublesome passages for the benefit of other readers.
- Attend a play and write an in-depth review, taking into account many elements of the drama: acting, direction, staging, costumes, lighting, and—if the work is relatively new and not a classic—the play itself.
- Have you ever taken part in a dramatic production, either as an actor or a member of the crew? What did the experience teach you about the nature of drama and about what makes a play effective?
- Write a one-act play of your own, featuring a minor character from one of the plays you have read for class. Think about what motivates that character, and let the play's central conflict grow from his or her preoccupations.

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WRITING A RESEARCH PAPER

A writer is a person for whom writing
more difficult than it is for other people

—THOMAS MAN

What You Will Learn in This Chapter

- To choose a topic for your research paper
- To find and evaluate sources
- To organize, write, and revise your research paper
- To cite and document your sources using MLA style

Oh no! You've been assigned a research paper, and every time you even think about starting it, your spirits sink and your blood pressure rises. You remember that Emily Dickinson was fun to talk about in class, but when you Google her name, the search engine states that there are more than 8.4 million entries. Time to switch author you decide. How about Ernest Hemingway? You really liked that one story from that assigned readings, but when you entered his name in a search of the college library catalog, it listed 135 books about him. What should you do? The paper is due in two weeks, not twenty years. Why would an otherwise very nice instructor put you through this mental trauma?

Why is it worthwhile to write a research paper? (Apart from the fact that you want a passing grade in the class, that is.) While you can learn much by exploring your own responses to a literary work, there is no substitute for entering into a conversation with others who have studied and thought about your topic. Literary criticism is that conversation. Your reading will expose you to the ideas of others who can shed light on a story, poem, or play. It will introduce you to the wide range of informed opinions that exist about literature, as about almost any subject. Sometimes, too, you research will uncover information about an author's life that leads you to new insight into a literary work. Undertaking a research paper gives you a chance to test your ideas against those of others, and in doing so to clarify your own opinions.

BROWSE THE RESEARCH

The most daunting aspect of the research paper may well be the mountains of information available on almost any literary subject. It can be hard to know where to begin. Sifting through books and articles is part of the research process. Unfortunately, the