

possibilities of stage and set. Look through your script again, and be sure your play can be acted in a confined area, using a modest and inexpensive set.

you made use of theatrical lighting and sounds, props, costumes, and effects? Not every ten-minute play will be able to take advantage of elaborate lighting and sound cues. Nevertheless, you can experiment on basic lighting effects such as “fade up,” “fade down,” or “black-out.” Similarly, low-tech sound effects like the bell in *Sure Thing* require effort but can make a big impression on an audience. Finally, look for ways to incorporate easily acquired props (a Bible for a religious character, a tape for a carpenter) and costumes (a red scarf for a liberated woman, a black scarf for one who is in mourning) that will help bring your play to life.

your play always reflect the fact that it will be performed by stage actors? When your actors talk, give them lines that are meant to be heard aloud, and provide them with actions that are motivated by their characters’ desires. Superheroes and film actors can perform all sorts of stunts and feats, but stage actors are real people working in real time, obeying the laws of physics. Don’t ask them to do impossible deeds, and don’t have unreasonable expectations of the people who will be performing your play. You may think it’s crucial that your lead be a six-foot-tall red-headed woman who can sing opera and do handstands, but your actors will rarely live up to all the traits that you envisioned. That’s okay: that’s why it’s called acting.

you taken into account your audience’s response to the play? You may be wild about your play, but if you receive a lukewarm—or worse—response, you should consider revising the script. Of course, you cannot write, direct, or produce a play by committee, but don’t discount the insights of audience members, especially if many of them have similar questions, comments, or suggestions.

started writing the ten-minute play

Good, the three model plays, our discussion of them, and the playwriting process will provide you with an idea for your own ten-minute play. If you’re stuck, writing kick-starts will help you get going.

In other forms of writing, feel free in the early stages of the process to experiment, to give up and start over again. Sometimes, after writing several plays, playwrights realize that their play would make a better story or a better film. That’s fine. One of the advantages of working in all four genres is that your ideas have a much broader field in which to be realized.

Creative Writing: Four Genres in Brief by David Starkey

Once you have settled on an idea for your play, remember that it should make its premise and conflict clear in the first minute or two. It should have several significant reversals and complications, and it should end with a twist that is surprising yet satisfying. And when you have finished your draft, be honest with yourself. As you listen to others read it aloud, try to gauge how you would react if you were an audience member with no particular stake in the play. Would you be bored and confused, or would you be completely absorbed by what was happening onstage?

KICK-STARTS Beginning your play

1. Write a play with two characters who are based on two people you know very well but who have never met each other. These characters should be natural antagonists who are in direct and immediate conflict with each other.
2. Write a play with a protagonist who is about to go over the edge. Introduce another character who is the perfect antagonist to do the pushing.
3. Plays are often topical. Choose a story from the news that has a clear conflict and interesting, compelling characters. Change the names and the circumstances enough so that you feel free to alter the facts of the case for dramatic impact. Then write a play centered around the news item.
4. Fiction writers work extremely hard to “bring their characters to life,” but as a playwright, your characters are already alive. Take advantage of the fact that you have people—breathing, moving, talking human beings—on the stage. Write a play that benefits from the proximity of your actors to their audience.
5. Maria Irene Fornes observes, “Work is part of everyone’s life. Except in plays.” Write a play that is set at work, or one in which work plays an integral role in the dramatic conflict.
6. Luis Valdez says, “The racial issue [in theater] is always just swept aside. It deserves to be swept aside only after it’s been dealt with. We cannot begin to approach a real solution to our social ills—a solution like integration, for instance, or assimilation—without dealing with all our underlying feelings about each other.” Write a play that deals with a significant issue involving race.
7. Choose an interesting and unusual prop—a shoehorn, a cardboard box of discarded auto parts, a teddy bear with one arm torn off—and write the play that goes with that object.
8. The sound of a bell ringing is a crucial element in David Ives’s *Sure Thing*. Choose another sound effect—for example, the ringing of a cell phone, or the shattering of a piece of glass, or a muted cough—and write a play in which that sound features prominently.

- ▶ **9.** If your play seems too boring or static, ask a couple of actors (they can be friends or relatives) to act out the action of your play silently, without any dialogue at all. If they are just standing around or sitting the entire time, start over with a new play, or rethink your conflict and characters so that the struggle between them is more dynamic, more direct, and more physical.
- ▶ **10.** Playwrights such as Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett may be almost as famous for what their characters *don't* say as what they do say. Write a play in which pauses and silences are crucial elements of the script.
- ▶ **11.** Look back at the stories, essays, and poems you have written in the past—whether they were for this class, another one, or simply yourself. See if you have written something that might have worked better onstage. Using what you have learned in this section, rethink and rewrite your earlier idea so that it is suitable as a play.
- ▶ **12.** David Rabe says that he begins a play “with an impulse or a situation or sometimes just a fragment of dialogue that begins to expand once you work on it. Something sticks in my mind—it could be a real person or a real exchange of dialogue or a fragment that just pops into my head.” Write a play that starts from something that, for whatever reason, “sticks in your mind.”
- ▶ **13.** Write a play that combines two or three of the previous kick-starts.

Playscript Format: A Model

HOW TO FORMAT A PLAY
A Play

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