

SHORT+SWEET PLAYWRITING COURSE
COURSE TUTOR: ALEX BROUN ©
www.alexbroun.com

The Four Stages of Writing a Play

1. Idea

This is the original *trigger* or seed the play will grow from. It come from any source at any time. All it needs is for you to be open and looking for it.

It could be *triggered* by a conversation you over hear at a bus stop, something that happens to you or a family member, a story you are told at a party, the death of a pet, an article in a newspaper etc. A trigger can even be an interesting title, a character name or line of dialogue that intrigues you. If it intrigues you to know more it might also intrigue the audience.

Places to look for *triggers*: read newspapers or magazines (Time, Bulletin), read history books, read non-fiction books, talk to people, interview specialists in a field that interests you, watch the news, listen to the radio, catch a bus, ride a train, walk down a busy city street, sit in a café and watch the people go by – imagine their lives, think about what makes you happy, elated, furious.

(PLEASE NOTE: Don't try to get ideas for your plays by watching other people's plays or films as the ideas may be very derivative. Try to discover your own ideas, passions and write from your own style.

You can watch and read other writer's work for pointers on technique or craft but you should not use other writer's work to look for ideas for the subject of your own play.)

2. Preparation

This stage comprises of everything you need to do to get ready to write your play. All the research, notes, thinking, character exercises or reading before you are fully prepared to tell your story. It can last from one day to three years.

A historical drama will take a lot more time to prepare for than a play based on an event that happened in your life.

Don't begin to write before you are ready. Make sure you know everything about your characters, explore every corner of your story and are fully inside the world of your play before you begin to write. Renaissance Italy may take longer than today's grocery shop.

If lines of dialogue or character traits or quirks comes to you – write then down ! Don't forget them ! Sometimes scenes will come to you in bits and pieces not a flowing whole.

But if you have all the bits and pieces you can then fit them together later – when you understand the shape of your play.

Have a general but clear outline of the beginning, middle and end of your story and be very clear on the story you are trying to tell. The message of the play is secondary to the story and far less important.

You should be able to sum up your play in one sentence before you begin to write. The sentence can be posed as a question. Try to use active words in the sentence and, as in the finished play, every word is crucial; i.e, Adam and Eve argue over that apple – Eve really wants it but what will it take for Adam to agree ?; rent boy Ben has an appointment with William but what he is asked to do may go beyond even his range of duties; Vanessa invites Fiona over to see her new multi-million dollar apartment but something unexpected is happening in the harbour down below.

3. First Draft

This is where you splurge the basic framework of your play on to paper or into your computer.

Keep the characters and story (plot) firmly in your mind or on a piece of paper next to you as you write. Also keep in mind who you are writing for, the specific theatre space and even the possible cast - if you know them. This can all help.

Also try to incorporate existing lines of dialogue or speeches you may have already written. (PLEASE NOTE: You may find some of these do not fit anymore or are unnecessary – simply put these in a separate folder or save them in a cuts file on your computer. It may help to have these later. Don't ever destroy anything that you write.)

Don't worry if details change while you are writing and there are subtle shifts in the beginning, middle and end. This is natural and to be expected and keeps the play fresh and alive while you are writing it.

Don't ponder or question yourself too much during this stage. The aim is just to get the play out of your head on to paper.

If you can't think of the exact word put in a approximation or question marks. You can come back and pit it in later. This is not the finished version. It is just the **First Draft**.

If you think of it as a sculpture you are just hacking out the basic shape, the smoothing and polishing will come later. Brendan Cowell writes his first drafts in exercise books in long hand – with pencil !

Do not allow self doubt to creep in to your head. This play you are writing will definitely be performed – so relax, be confident and just write. What you have to say is important – so write it.

4. Refinement

The great late Nick Enright once said: "Writing is not writing, it is re-writing." And never a truer word has been said.

This is where you go back over your play with a fine tooth comb and begin to cut, re-arrange and polish the dialogue and action.

You should begin this process on your own but give yourself a least a day or two – even a week - before you go back to the play and begin your refinement. It is crucial to have a bit of distance and objectivity from the play before you begin this process.

After you have gone through the script yourself and made any little changes you have now reached **Second Draft** stage – or if you have made very few changes you may still want to refer to it as a First Draft.

(REMEMBER: Save every draft as a separate document in your computer. Don't discard any draft. The basic rule is that at any stage if you make substantial changes to your script then that new version should be saved as the next draft and numbered accordingly.)

After you have finished your **Second Draft** or are happy with your First Draft – then it is time to move on to the next and very crucial step in Refinement – getting feedback.

When you are happy that your script is ready for other people to see it is beneficial to have a reading during this stage with some actors or just friends and also to have some people who you trust read the play.

Remember don't act immediately on every single comment you hear. Wait until you have a broad range of comments then try to find the common thread. Remember - one person's opinion is subjective, a number of people's opinion is objective – and in this stage you are looking for objectivity.

A public reading is the best way to judge your play during this stage as you can sit in the audience and see their immediate response. Are they bored, confused, hopefully fascinated ? It's even better to listen to people who don't know you comment on the play afterwards as they are likely to be more honest.

Indeed the most helpful comments I have had on my plays were by people who did not know they were talking to the writer !

Remember your play – as important to you as it is – is just a blueprint for a performance. It does not come to life until actors, a director, designers, technicians and the audience bring it to life – and it is in that forum that you should judge your play. Not on your computer screen. Something that looks great on paper may just not work in performance and you need to be ready for that eventuality.

If you want to be precious with your words then be a novelist, a poet or a short story writer. Plays are crafted, not written – and they may take a lot of battering and hammering (often quite painful and difficult for a writer) till they are in their final shape.

At the reading or when you get feedback just write the comments down and later you can think about the merits of what was said. Don't get defensive and don't see the comments as personal attacks – they are commenting on your play, not you !

Try not try to justify your play. Just listen. In this stage it is absolutely vital to shut your mouth and open your ears. The best writers are often the most humble.

Remember if people are taking the time to give feedback the play must have affected them in some way so you are already off to a positive start whatever negative things they may say.

You may have strengths and also weaknesses so this feedback can help you strengthen your weaknesses. For example you might write beautiful dialogue but your structure may be poor, or you might have a great story but the characterisation is unclear.

Use this feedback to identify your weaknesses and work on them but remember in so doing hold on to your strengths. This is what makes your writing vital and significant.

Also remember that you can not please everyone no matter what you do. I have a cousin who loves Romeo and Juliet but says it would be even better with a happy ending ! In the end, once you have assessed all the feedback, you must write the play you want to write.

Once you have taken in *all* the feedback you can then go back to your Second or First Draft and make some more changes or again you may decide to make none. You have now reached **Third Draft** stage.

During this **Third Draft** stage always remember to keep referring back to the original spine of your story and your one sentence summary. In re-writing you must be careful never to go too far away from the original world of your play as it is possible that in re-writing you lose the original play.

Again you may decide after listening to all comments and feedback you are still happy with your **First Draft**. This is completely okay as long as you have tested the play and have been open to listening to people's comments.

If you still believe your **First Draft** is still it – then stick with your guns. In the end it remains – and must remain your play. In the end the most important voice a writer listens to is their own !

Or alternatively after hearing all sides you may be happy with your **Second Draft** – which you worked on yourself, so stick with that. The important thing is to go through the process openly and if you discover you had what you wanted all along – then so be it.

This **Third Draft** (or First or Second) is then the version you are ready to submit to Festivals or theatres and hopefully will be performed.

Be aware that your director may again suggest changes, which need to be considered and if you feel they are valid – then implemented. (There is a whole area of the writer-director relationship which we will explore in greater depth later.)

After implementing these changes you might like to call this script – your performance draft - **Fourth Draft** (or First, Second or Third)

Again after the performances of your play you might like to make some more minor or major adjustments – after seeing it played out in front of an audience over a number of times.

This after-performance draft can be called your **Fifth Draft** and is the final text of your play – until the next production that is when a whole new set of people may take a completely different angle.

Theatre is a living entity, plays are alive and always changing. This is the fundamental aspect a playwright needs to grasp. You must be flexible to other people's ideas but also truthful to the central core of your play. In the end it remains your play.

Summary of Drafts

First Draft : “Rough” – Write it quickly, without question or doubts. Important thing is just to write it.

Second Draft : “Polish” – Several days or a week later, re-read the first draft and begin to cut and polish

Third Draft : “Feedback” – After feedback and a public reading, taking on board people's general comments

Fourth Draft : “Performance” - After consultation with your directors and actors and making adjustments specifically for staging of the play. This is the version that will be performed.

Fifth Draft : “After Performance” – Final adjustments after the play has been performed to incorporate any further changes that happened during the season or you now feel are necessary. This is the “final” version of your play – till the next season.