

HOW TO WRITE A PLAY OR MUSICAL



THE
THEATERMAKERS
STUDIO

THE EXECUTION PLAN SERIES



INTRODUCTION

It's finally the moment.

You've had an idea bouncing around your head, or a character that has been haunting your dreams... or perhaps you simply sat down one day and said "hey me, why haven't I tried writing a play before?" Well... why haven't you?

Now is the moment, and this is the guide to help you get the fundamentals of writing your story for the stage.

But actually, before we get there... we need to consider one important detail: does this story **NEED** to be on the stage?

I've seen it all too often: a wonderfully dynamic story being told with rich characters, a distinct point of view and a touchingly simple takeaway. **EXCEPT.** It wasn't a play. Sure, it looked like a play on the page, but it ignored every theatrical principle and it longed to be something else: a film, a novel, an epic poem. The primary focus on the stage is the spoken word (theaters are auditoriums...literally "hearing places"), so if your story favors big action sequences, requires minute focus on visual details, or features a cast of thousands... you may not be writing a play.

Consider the limitations of the theatrical space: you're bound to the stage itself, your audience can choose where they focus (rather than you or the director being able to choose the focus for them, like with a close up film shot), locations and periods are suggested rather than recreated, etc. Consider also the *freedoms* of the theatrical form: monologues and music are common, there is a greater sense of sus-

pension of disbelief, a more intimate connection between audience and performer, etc.

Is your idea unhampered by the limitations of the theater and energized by the potential of it?

Great, then let's begin.

IDEA

If you're reading this, you likely already have this bit down, but let's pretend you don't and start from the very beginning.

WE BEGIN TO WRITE A PLAY JUST LIKE WRITING ANYTHING: WE COME UP WITH AN IDEA. THAT IDEA COULD BE ANYTHING:

- A **conflict** like the eternal struggle between good and evil
- A **theme** like the absurdity of existence
- Or a **character** like Joan of Arc or an alien living on Earth

Once you have a general sense of your idea, it's time to (like we will be doing with every aspect of this process) start moving from the generic to the specific.

Say that economic inequality is a topic you would like to address in your play - great!

Now start narrowing it down.... *What kind of economic equality?*

Perhaps pay inequality between men and women. Great!

Now in what field? Perhaps in law firms. Great!

Now where, and what kind of law firm? Perhaps corporate law firms in Washington, DC. Great!

Now which side of the conflict are we siding with?

And on, and on, digging deeper until the seeds of your story (in this case we're edging closer to knowing our setting and perhaps who our protagonist is) begin to emerge from our rather broad idea.

As you narrow your focus, continue to brainstorm. Jot down anything and everything that comes to mind, but pay close attention to emotions you may be feeling, images that come to you, or people who come to mind. Remember these things... they will likely become quite useful as you begin to piece together your story.

IDEAS

SOURCES

NOTES

IDEAS

SOURCES

NOTES

IDEAS

SOURCES

NOTES

At this point we can begin breaking things down further to crystallize some of the elements of our story.

SETTING

Now that you've determined what you would like to write about, it's time to consider where and when you should locate your story, otherwise known as your setting.

Often, your idea will clearly send you in the direction of what your setting should be. For example, if you're writing about Abraham Lincoln or the French Revolution, you're likely not setting your play in modern Mozambique. However, you still want to drill down further and get more specific.

If you're writing about Joan Of Arc, what part of her life are you focusing on? What time and locations does that span? What, of those locations, are you interested in placing your action?

IF YOUR IDEA DOESN'T IMMEDIATELY COME PACKED WITH AN OBVIOUS LOCATION AND TIME PERIOD, ASK YOURSELF A FEW QUESTIONS:

- What places first come to mind when thinking of my idea?
- What location or time period would be the most difficult to deal with my idea?

Remember, you want to stack the odds against your characters in order to heighten the stakes and deepen your conflict. Placing your character in a location or time where the solutions to their problems are readily available with little trouble does not good drama make. Being “in the wrong place at the wrong time” is precisely where you want your characters to end up (or potentially even start), so always take that into consideration.

SOME OTHER FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN CHOOSING LOCATIONS:

- Private versus public: characters will often act differently depending upon whether they are in close, private quarters with their fellow characters as opposed to when they are in a public forum with perhaps prying eyes and the court of public opinion against them.
- Strange versus familiar: is this your protagonist's space? Are they a guest or unwelcome? Are they comfortable here? Who has the power in this location?
- Expansive versus intimate: are your characters free to roam or are they locked in close proximity to one another? Are there numerous modes of entry and exit? How does the size of the space impact your characters' emotions or conversations?



ACTION EXERCISE: Describe your setting: When and where is your story set? How do people dress here? What do your locations look like? What is the climate? What does it sound like? How do these things impact your characters?

CHARACTER

Stories live or die on their characters.

If you are reading a child's bedtime story, you'll want to see heroes we can root for, villains that we detest and clear objectives and conflicts for our hero to pursue. Writing a play is quite similar in this regard, we want a focal character who has big wants, big obstacles, and a ton at stake as they go through a life-altering journey. In plays, however, our "heroes" are often much more complex and less likely to fall into the "good/evil" binary of hero and villain as in a fairy tale, thus we call these main characters of our stories the "protagonist," or "one who plays the chief role."

Hamlet wants to avenge his father's death, Ariel wants to be "a part of their world," Jack Worthing wants to wed Gwendolyn... each of these characters desperately wants something, has an immediate obstacle (indecisiveness, being a mermaid, not being a true "gentleman," respectively) and goes through a course of ever escalating obstacles/conflicts to achieve their goal.

Clearly defining what it is your protagonist wants is one of the most important steps in the playwriting

process. This want will drive your character (and your audience) through the entire course of the story, so it needs to be **clear** and it needs to be **important**.

A STRONG PROTAGONIST

- Wants something
- Has obstacles
- Makes choices/is active
- Changes/learns something
- Receives reward/retribution

Conflict (where your protagonist's want is matched up against an opposing force) is where your character will truly begin to shine. In order to attain their want, they will be forced to make choices that will challenge who they are and what they hold dear, ultimately coming out the other end of their journey having been changed by the experience.

IDEALLY, YOUR CHARACTER WILL COME INTO CONFLICT ON THREE LEVELS:

- **The internal** - a conflict within the character, usually an inner struggle with self-doubt, morality, or some other character flaw/foible
- **The personal** - a direct conflict with another character, typically defined by either sharing a want that only one character can attain or by having wants that are mutually exclusive (one "winning" means the other "losing")
- **The external** - a broader conflict that brings the character into conflict with the community or world at large (Oedipus finds himself in conflict with the rules of the universe/fate, Hamlet is party to a larger conflict with Fortinbras, etc)

For an example that most people know, the end of Act 1 of the musical *Hamilton* finds Alexander engaged in these three levels of conflict as he struggles in the aid of the American side of the Revolutionary War: he is fighting an inner battle against his own sense of rash pride (which is constantly getting him in trouble), his personal battles with Washington and Burr (as they stand in the way of his "want" of rising through the ranks/commanding his own battalion), as well as being in a larger conflict with the British monarchy. Being in conflict on these three levels amps up the tension for us as audience members as we perceive Alexander to be battling great odds, but also adds complexity and depth to his character...showing his humanity as he struggles to balance these conflicts and learns how these conflicts are all intertwined within him.

In a well-rounded, exciting story, every character will want something. Sometimes these characters' wants will build a subplot (a secondary story featuring secondary characters that runs in tandem with the protagonist's), and sometimes these characters will be in direct opposition to our protagonist. These characters are called "antagonists," and ideally are as complex and interesting as our protagonist.

A GOOD ANTAGONIST

- Also wants something (often the same thing as the protagonist)
- Provides obstacles
- Is the “hero of their own story”

To stick with the example of *Hamilton*, Aaron Burr would be Alexander's antagonist. In this instance, they both come from similar backgrounds and want the same thing, but clearly in order for one to "win," the other loses... They compete for the same things, provide obstacles for one another, and ultimately (and tragically) Burr provides the ending of Hamilton's journey. What is remarkable about this example, and makes it such a great example, is that we empathize just as much (and in some instances even *more* so) with Burr as we do with Alexander. He is not just a mustache-twirling villain, he is a complex human being with passionate wants and foibles, and that makes their dynamic and conflict (and consequently the story) remarkably rich and compelling.



ACTION EXERCISE: Write character sketches of your protagonist and antagonist. Who are they? Where did they come from? What do they want? How far are they willing to go to get it? What are their inner, personal and external conflicts?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

PLOT

Plot is essentially the events that make up your story. Naturally, the plot you devise will be individual to your own story and likely not look quite like any others. However, you will find that 9 times out of 10, successful plots share a similar 3-part structure.

In laypeople's terms, stories have a beginning, middle, and an end. In dramatic terms, stories have exposition, complication, and resolution.

These three parts of the dramatic structure are often called "Acts," giving way to the term "Three Act Structure," otherwise known as "climactic structure" as the action of the story builds to a dramatic climax then tapers off into a denouement, or resolution.

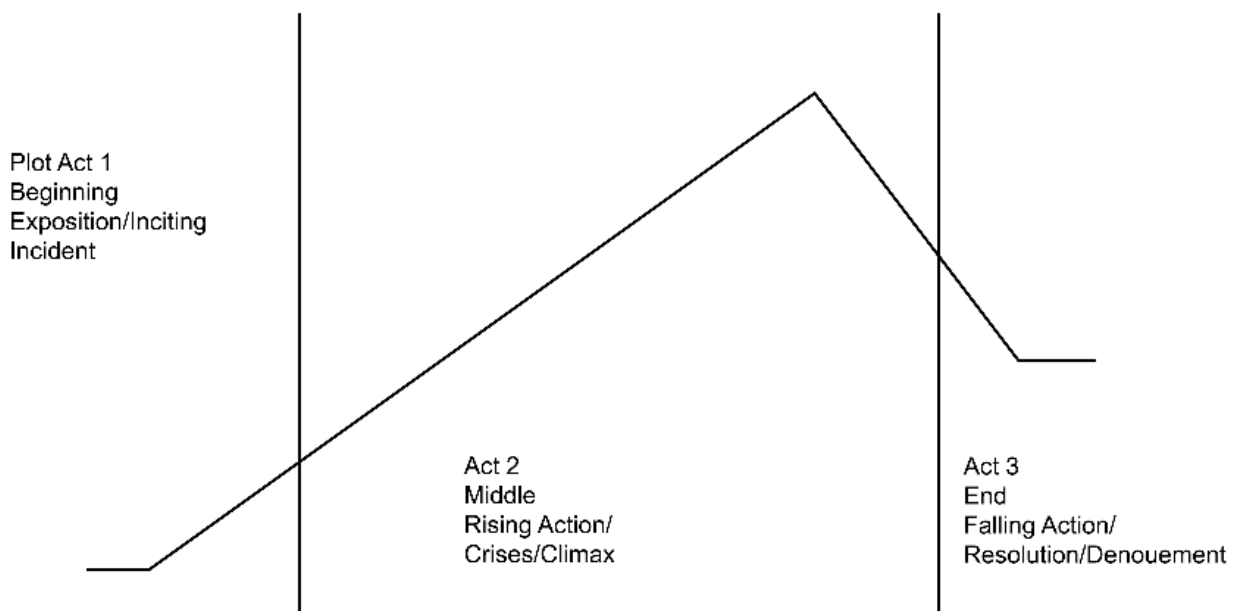
Now, you might be saying to yourself...

YOU: *But Self... I thought most shows only had TWO Acts, sometimes only ONE?!*

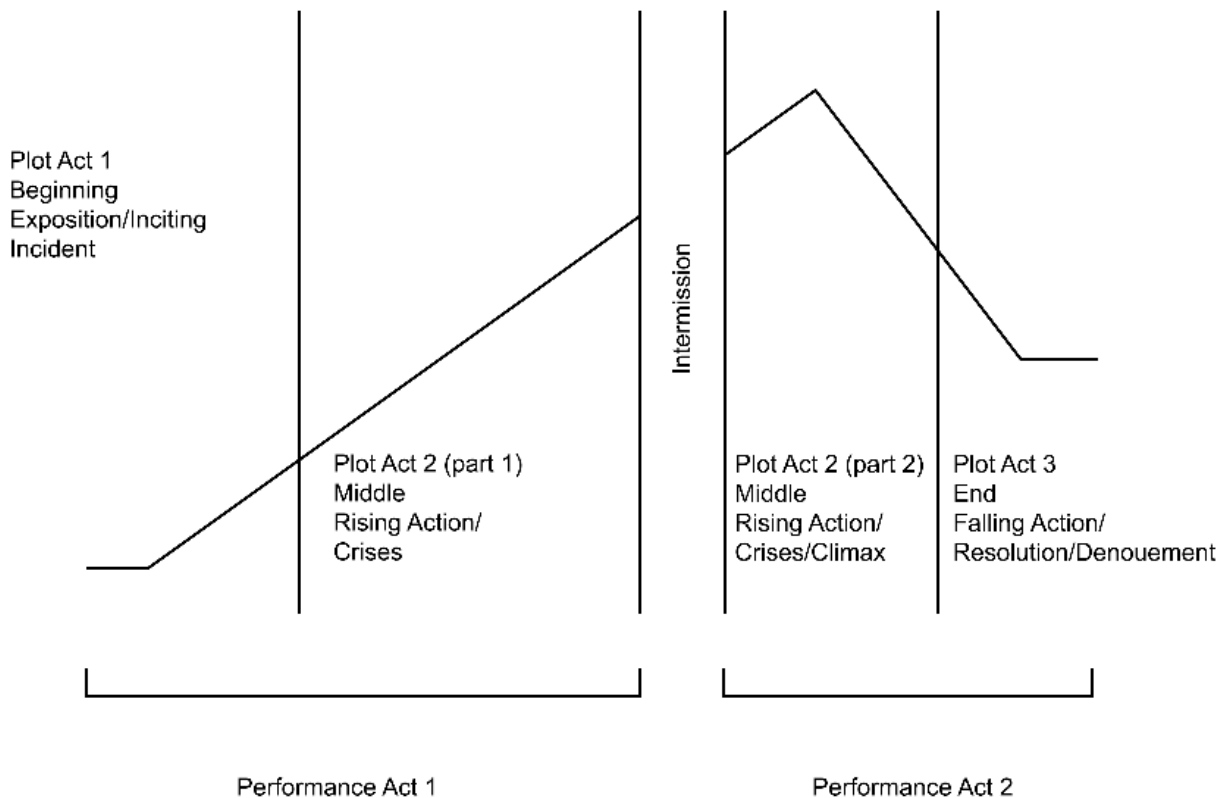
You'd be absolutely correct in pointing this out, and I would jump into your internal dialogue to let you know that...

ME: *Shows that are split into two Acts, typically have their intermission in the middle of the plot's Second Act, usually at a point where a major reversal occurs for the protagonist that forever alters their journey and takes them down a new path towards the climax of the story.*

If you were to chart a Three Act Structure on a graph, it would look something like this:



And if you were to then divide that Three Act Structure into two performance acts, it would look something like this:



The most important thing to note in these diagrams is that your second Act is the bulk of your show. It's the meat and potatoes where your protagonist does most of the heavy lifting, overcomes ever-escalating obstacles and reaches their dramatic climax. On either end, we have much smaller sections that help support the bulk of the story.

In the first Act of your plot, your Exposition, we will want to learn as much as is necessary about the world of the story, our protagonist, and what they want in order to then propel them into action. This is where we establish the norms of the story world before we trouble them with what is called The Inciting Incident.

The Inciting Incident is the moment that kickstarts your protagonist's journey toward attaining their want and sets the entire story into action. In *Hamlet*, it is Hamlet receiving the demand for vengeance from the ghost of his father. In *Glengarry Glenn Ross*, it is the famous "Always be closing" monologue that establishes the rules of the sales contest as well as the extraordinary stakes. In *The Music Man*, it is Harold Hill meeting Marian the Librarian. Your inciting incident should be clear, exciting and propulsive. Think of your inciting incident as a snowball being rolled down from the top of a

mountain... it should be gaining momentum, getting bigger (more complex) and aiming for the big boom at the climax of your story.

From here to the climax of the story is what is commonly referred to as the Rising Action. This is where your protagonist will attempt various actions to achieve their want, attempt to overcome obstacles and find their life, relationships, and desires being further and further complicated. The details of the actions and obstacles will be specific to your protagonist's journeys, but always have a mind towards making things more and more difficult as the story goes by, increasing the stakes (what your protagonist has to gain or lose by succeeding or failing), and challenging your protagonist in ways that they can learn or attain things with each step that can be utilized in their climactic moment. If it were a fairytale, it would be our hero overcoming ever more difficult trials in order to obtain a coat of armor, a sword, and a shield that would be necessary to defeat the dragon. In more naturalistic drama, these items are likely far less literal and are more likely tied to lessons that are learned, information that is gathered, or truths about the protagonist's self that propel them towards their life-altering climax.

Your climax is the final culmination of everything that has happened in your story. It can be the final confrontation between your protagonist and the antagonist (sometimes in a battle of wills, sometimes in a literal physical battle), or the moment your character makes an extraordinary decision/action/sacrifice in order to attain their want. This is the moment where all the chips are on the table, no holds are barred, and we finally determine whether your protagonist will succeed or fail in their desires. Everything builds to this moment, and your audience should be sitting on the edge of their seat in anticipation.

After the climax, once we have learned the fate of our protagonist, we have the resolution or falling action. This is where the loose ends are tied up, any subplots are resolved and we typically see the world of the play attain its "new normal" (as differentiated from the exposition's "normal" which has now been altered due to the course of the protagonist's journey). The length of this section can vary, but is typically the shortest of all of the three Acts where we learn the fates of our characters prepare our audience to return to the "real" world.

THINKING ABOUT ACTS AND SCENES:

Dividing your story into Acts and Scenes can sometimes be a tricky business. Not all shows have Act breaks, and some don't utilize Scene breaks either and simply run their action continuously. However...

Dividing your show into two Acts can be done, as mentioned earlier, by choosing a point at or just past the actual middle of your story where a major reversal occurs. This should be a moment where everything the protagonist thinks they know about the world gets turned on its ear and likely spins them into the lowest point of their emotional journey.



Dividing your show into Scenes is often found organically... any time there is a shift in physical location or time, you're likely in a new scene. Sometimes scenes can be marked based upon the entrances or exits of characters (something often called "French scenes"). When writing scene breaks into your piece, consider how you want the breaks to be performed. Do you want there to be hard breaks or blackouts between scenes to really distinguish between them, or do you want smooth, almost seamless transitions so the action flows from one moment to the next? How you choose to handle these shifts can have a marked impact on your audience by either shocking them with blackouts, allowing them a moment to breathe and release tension between scenes, or lulling or propelling them ever onward with smooth transitions.

The most important thing to remember about any given scene? Everybody needs to want something. If anybody enters a scene and doesn't want something, either they don't belong there or the scene isn't necessary.

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ACTION EXERCISE:

SCENE:	CHARACTER NAME:	WHAT DO THEY WANT:	HOW WILL THEY ACHIEVE IT:
<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>
SCENE:	CHARACTER NAME:	WHAT DO THEY WANT:	HOW WILL THEY ACHIEVE IT:
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SCENE:	CHARACTER NAME:	WHAT DO THEY WANT:	HOW WILL THEY ACHIEVE IT:
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<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>
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DIALOGUE

One of the greatest elements that separates a play from other forms of media is an intense focus on dialogue. A lot can “happen” in a play (everything from falling in love to waging war), however nearly all of it is engaged as a series of conversations between characters. In other words... dialogue.

What your protagonist wants and how they go about attaining it in the face of the story’s obstacles will determine a great deal of the content of these conversations, however, just as important as what a character says is how they say it.

Take a close listen to a group of strangers having a conversation. Chances are you will be able to get a rough idea of who these people are simply based on how they speak:

Are they using a lot of multi-syllabic, Scrabble-game-winning words? Chances are they’re highly educated (or want to appear as such!).

Are they using slang or lingo commonly associated with a certain locale, community, or age group? Chances are they are a member of that community (or, again, are attempting to project that they are).

Are they speaking loudly and animatedly or quietly and reservedly?

Do they change the way they are talking depending upon who they are talking to or what they might want from somebody?

If you take all of these dialectic markers and put them together, you begin to paint a picture of the kind of person the speaker either is or wants the listener to think they are. Both of these angles, what one is

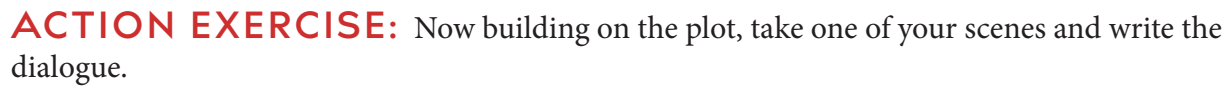
and what one projects, are vitally important in building your characters and crafting dialogue that best represents who they are and what they need in any given moment. Are they typically a meek and mild person, but are trying to act tough to confront a bully? Are they a naturally charming person and using that to its full effect to woo someone? Paying close attention to how your character uses language in any given moment will go a long way toward creating a rich, complex persona, and give your actors lots to play with on stage.

TOOLS TO UTILIZE IN DIALOGUE:

- Word choice - the actual words characters use are often great indicators of the kind of people they are. Do they use big, archaic words or quippy modern phrases? Do they swear? Do they use religious or culturally specific language? Do they use metaphors or imagery that evoke a particular attitude or mood?
- Tempo - Fast paced, witty banter or methodical and thoughtful contemplations? Are you breaking up quick hits of dialogue with monologues? Speed within lines (how fast your characters speak) can tell us a lot about characters, while the overall speed of your dialogue (the tempo of the scene) can evoke a sense of urgency or lull us into a sense of security, depending upon your needs.
- Accent - fairly self-explanatory, but do your characters have an accent? If so, how strong? Does it only come out under certain circumstances?
- Style - Make sure your language is consistent with your style. Modern quirky comedies have a different sensibility than melodramas or period pieces.
- Brevity - Always be mindful of running times and attention spans... try not to say with 12 words what you can say with 4. Brevity, after all, "is the soul of wit."



ACTION EXERCISE: Imagine a scenario where your protagonist and antagonist both want the same thing. Write their dialogue as they attempt to attain it.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Formatting can be a bit of a sticky wicket for some folks. Some writers have a particular personal style that they like to use in their formatting, while some theaters or organizations have specific formatting guidelines they will ask you to utilize for submitting to them. Those are concerns for another day. When you're first getting started, the two most important things to remember regarding formatting is being clear and being consistent.

15

STEVE

Look, I'm saying dialogue in a play!

DAVE

Well isn't that just lovely, Steve... Now how about you finish making those cookies?

Commonly, stage directions that are internal to a line are enclosed in parentheses and indented with line breaks to differentiate it from the spoken line, and longer stage directions between lines are indented to the center of the page:

STEVE

I will, I will...

(sticking his finger into the dough and eating some)

Trouble is, I just love eating it like this!

Dave rolls his eyes and begins impatiently tapping his toes. Steve, finally noticing Dave's looks, goes to the oven and sets the temperature, grabs a sheet pan and rolling pin, and begins rolling out the dough.

DAVE

Finally, thank you...

Personally, my own formatting looks like this:

STEVE

I will, I will... *(sticking his finger into the dough and eating some)* Trouble is, I just love eating it like this!

Dave rolls his eyes and begins impatiently tapping his toes. Steve, finally noticing Dave's looks, goes to the oven and sets the temperature, grabs a sheet pan and rolling pin, and begins rolling out the dough.

DAVE

Finally, thank you...

But your mileage may vary.

Start with the most common formatting, then adjust as your (and your actors') needs dictate.

You may find it beneficial to also include a character description page in your script. This is by no means mandatory, but can be helpful for those reading your script to have a sense of who your characters are before diving into the text. These are typically formatted as such:

CAST OF CHARACTERS

STEVE	Late 30s. The well-meaning, but often oblivious husband of DAVE. A lover of raw cookie dough.
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DAVE	Late 30s. The kind but impatient husband of STEVE. A lover of schedules and promptness.
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PRO TIP

Want to make sure your script is formatted to industry standard? Try programs like Final Draft or hire a formatting service to do it for you! Email summer@davenporttheatrical.com for some great suggestions!

WHAT'S NEXT?

So you've developed your idea, built your characters, assembled a compelling plot and wrote all your dialogue in proper formatting... But plays are meant to be on stage, not just on your shelf, so now what?

Now you read it out loud!

Have some friends over, order pizza and read the play aloud. Listen carefully... where do your actors trip over their words? Your dialogue may be a bit unnatural or clumsy there. Where are folks laughing, crying, or checking their phone? Obviously things are working (or not) at these spots... Take notes, ask for feedback (but don't take it all to heart... everyone has an opinion, and you're the one raising this baby, at the end of the day the only opinion that matters is yours). Then...

Revise.

Then read again.

Then revise again.

Then expand your scope. Look for opportunities with organizations that develop new work or offer staged readings or workshops, meet with directors and producers to discuss your work... determine what your goals are, how you can attain them, and who can help you get there, and then go for it.

After all, writing the play is just the first step.

AN ADDENDUM FOR MUSICALS

If you're going to write a musical (and I highly suggest that you do), your thought process regarding your overall story is going to be much the same. You still want to find a compelling idea, populate an appropriate setting with active and dynamic characters that want things and grow over the course of your story.

But then... there's the music.

If you pay close attention to the placement of songs in a musical, you'll begin to notice something: the music tends to take over when your characters' emotions and conflict are at their highest points. Whether it is falling in love, declaring your heart's desire, or making a decision that is going to irreparably change your life... these heightened moments are where your song takes over.

You need music when words fail. When spoken dialogue fails to encompass the enormity of the situation and your character must burst out into song. If the emotion is there, it makes sense. We forget how absurd it is for someone to just bust out into a song and dance because they're happy because it just works.

THERE ARE A FEW SONG ARCHETYPES TO KEEP IN MIND, ALONG WITH FAIRLY CLASSIC PLACEMENTS FOR THEM:

- **World-building song** - typically the opening number of the show, introduces us to the world, the characters and sets the tone of the piece. Think: Arabian Nights (*Aladdin*), Good Morning, Baltimore (*Hairspray*)
- **The "I Want" song** - typically the second song of the show, introduces us to what our protagonist wants and what will drive them (and us) over the course of the show. Think: Part of Your World (*The Little Mermaid*), My Shot (*Hamilton*)
- **The Act 2 opener** - relatively self defining in placement, typically a bit of a fluff song performed by the company and/or led by a secondary character. A good refresher to get you back into the swing of things, but you're not missing anything if you're late getting back from intermission. Think: Masquerade (*Phantom of the Opera*), Building the Barricade (*Les Misérables*)
- **The comedic/trick song**: typically towards the end of the first Act, often placed just before the major reversal that takes us into intermission (the comedy lulls us into forgetting the conflict,

which then gets heightened when it intrudes back in). Often known as a “list song,” it typically features quick comedic patter/rhyming or otherwise caters to either the songwriter or performers unique skillset. Think: La Vie Boheme (*RENT*), A Musical (*Something Rotten!*)

- **The “11 o’clock number”** - typically the penultimate (second to last) song of the show, usually the most emotionally intense number of the show where our protagonist is facing the full brunt of their conflict and paving the way for a transformative action. Think: Rose’s Turn (*Gypsy*), I’m Here (*The Color Purple*)

THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT EFFECTIVE SONGWRITING:

Songs are active - use your songs not only to express emotions, but to do something. Fall in love, convince your troops to fight with you, make that life-altering choice... Keep the number of songs that simply set a mood or are clever but un-propulsive to a minimum. Songs are your greatest emotional currency in a musical, so always use them to your greatest benefit.

Songs have a beginning, middle, and an end - songs are like mini scenes-within-a-scene, and as they are actively doing something (see above), they have an arc of their own. Take “I Will Show You the World” for example: Aladdin wants to woo Jasmine, but she is unconvinced (there’s your beginning). Aladdin takes her on the carpet ride and sings about all he can show/give to her, and she gets caught in the spell and joins the song (there’s your middle). They then come back down to earth, clearly having fallen in love (there’s your end).

A FINAL WORD ON MUSICALS:

Don’t have any clue how to write music? Can’t write a rhyming couplet to save your life? Don’t worry. That’s what collaborators are for.

Don’t have a collaborator? Do your research... see more shows, talk to composers and lyricists whose work you see and who you respect and whose styles seem simpatico with yours. Talk to your fellow theater makers. Artistically date around until you find a match. Theater is a collaborative art, and learning how to create hand-in-hand with another artist is a valuable skill that will help you all the way down the line in this industry.

You got this.

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**For more execution plans like these visit The TheaterMakers Studio at
www.TheaterMakersStudio.com!**