

NAME: _____

PLAYWRITING

Basics & Exercises

Theatre 2
Spring 2015

VOCABULARY

1. Character: who the actor pretends to be; has objectives
2. Climax: the turning point in a plot
3. Conflict: obstacles that get in the way of a character achieving what he or she wants; what the characters struggle against
4. Denouement: the final resolution of the conflict in a plot
5. Dialogue: a conversation between two or more characters
6. Dramatic Action: an explanation of what the characters are trying to do
7. Exposition: the beginning part of a plot that provides important background information
8. Falling Action: the series of events following the climax of a plot
9. Monologue: a long speech one character gives on stage
10. Rising Action: the middle part of a plot, consisting of complications and discoveries that create conflict
11. Scene: a single situation or unit of dialogue in a play
12. Setting: time and place of a scene and/or play
13. Stage Directions: messages from the playwright to the actors, technicians, and others in the theatre telling them what to do and how to do it

Aristotle's 6 Elements of Theatre

1. **Plot:** The events of a play. In the *plot* of a play, characters are involved in conflict that has a pattern of movement. The action and movement in a play follows the pattern below:
Exposition → Conflict → Rising Action → Climax → Falling Action → Resolution
2. **Theme:** The main idea of the play, or what the play means. Sometimes, the *theme* is clearly stated in the title or through a character's dialogue. Sometimes, the theme takes some thought to determine. In this case, consider the following question: What feeling am I left with after reading this play?
3. **Diction:** The word and language choices made by the playwright for the different characters. *Diction* helps us to define a character – to help an actor bring them to life.
4. **Character:** The people presented in the play that are involved in the movement of the plot. Each *character* has their own unique style and personality.
5. **Music:** There are 2 different ways to consider *music*. The first way is to look at the musicality of one or more character's dialogue and speech patterns. The second way is to consider the music present in a play or the impact of music on a given moment in a play.
6. **Spectacle:** The visual elements of the play. The *spectacle* often involves the design of a play: sets, lights, costumes; etc.

PLOT

Plot: The events of a play. In the *plot* of a play, characters are involved in conflict that has a pattern of movement. The action and movement in a play follows the pattern below:

Exposition → Conflict → Rising Action → Climax → Falling Action → Resolution

Questions to ask yourself that will help clarify your *plot*:

- What happened before this moment?
- What will happen next?
- Where in the plot does this scene take place?
- Does this scene help further the plot?
- What information do we get from this scene?
- Why does this action have to happen here?

Problems you may run into when it comes to *plot*:

- ***More scenes needed***
 - *What does this mean?* More scenes are needed to understand how the plot developed to this point, what happens in the scene, or what happens next.
- ***Unnecessary information***
 - *What does this mean?* Information provided in the scene does not help us learn about the characters in a meaningful way. Too many details make the story messy and difficult to understand. It also pulls the focus away from the story.
- ***Setting change too fast***
 - *What does this mean?* There are too many mini-scenes which might be more effective if combined into a few larger scenes in one or two locations.
- ***Setting is not specific enough***
 - *What does this mean?* More details are needed to let the audience know the location.
- ***Special effects***
 - *What does this mean?* The scenes work better for film or TV than they do for the stage. For example, they jump from one elaborate setting to another – this would mean the scene change would not be quick and easy by any means.

CONFLICT

Conflict: obstacles that get in the way of a character achieving what he or she wants; what the characters struggle against

Questions to ask yourself that will help clarify your *conflict*:

- What is this play about?
- Who is the *protagonist*?
- Who is the *antagonist*?
- What do each of these characters want? (*Keep your answer to 1 sentence for each character.*)
- What is stopping them from getting what they want? (*Again, keep your answer to 1 sentence for each character.*)
- Do either of the characters have to sacrifice anything to achieve his or her goal? If yes, how big is the sacrifice?

Problems you may run into when it comes to *conflict*:

- ***No conflict***
 - *What does this mean?* The characters don't appear to have any obstacles to their objectives, or any obstacles that are presented are easily overcome, or the problems are minor and the resulting conflict lacks consequence.
- ***Conflict resolved too quickly***
 - *What does this mean?* The change the characters present is not believable because it occurs too soon or too easily. The conflict doesn't really challenge the characters.
- ***Unfocused conflict***
 - *What does this mean?* It is unclear what the conflict is about and/or why the characters are involved in it. Perhaps there are too many characters or not enough dialogue.
- ***Conflict does not progress***
 - *What does this mean?* The central conflict or dramatic action does not cause change in the scene; in other words, any change that happens to a character doesn't happen because of the conflict.

HOMEWORK: PROBLEM-SOLVING EXERCISE

You are going to repeat the exercise we did together in class. You must select **3** of the situations below and write a separate paragraph for each one, explaining a possible outcome.

Make sure to ask yourself the following questions:

1. And then what happened?
2. Is this plot interesting to me?
3. How might this situation resolve?

Your paragraphs should be on a separate piece of paper. Please re-state your chosen scenario at the top, and please number each new paragraph.

Choose 3 of the following situations:

- Jill and Joe, who are friends, are both suspended from school for the same reason. What happens when they go home and tell their respective parents? Do they both tell the same story?
- Tammy likes Tom, a boy in her class. She wants to ask him to have dinner at her house, but she is afraid he will say “no”. What happens?
- Steve wants Susan to go to a rock concert with him, but Susan’s father doesn’t think she should go. Why? What happens?
- Lee builds a rocket in the family garage. What happens when it is stolen? Who stole it?
- Chris finds a magic lantern and is granted three wishes. What happens when the first wish brings misfortune?

CHARACTER & DICTION

Dialogue: A conversation between two or more characters.

Questions to ask yourself that will help clarify your *dialogue*:

- How might the characters' true feelings be communicated to the audience through dialogue?
- What narrative clues have been left out?
- Can you think of a way to say this that is truer to the character?
- How does each character feel about the other characters? Do we know this by something they say?
- What dialogue could be cut without damaging the story?

Problems you may run into when it comes to *dialogue*:

- ***Narration***
 - *What does this mean?* There is a narrator talking to the audience about what is happening, or you have a character who is providing a lot of narration. Try to avoid this. Your story is best told through the dialogue and action. Show, don't tell.
- ***Too little/too much information***
 - *What does this mean?* The whole story is not shared with the audience, or there are a lot of details that are not important to the story.
- ***Recycled lines***
 - *What does this mean?* The dialogue consists of recycled lines from popular culture, such as books, TV; etc.
- ***Too little dialogue***
 - *What does this mean?* The action far outweighs the dialogue, so we never get a sense of what the characters are experiencing emotionally.

HOMEWORK: DIALOGUE EXERCISE

Select **1** of the following exercises for your homework:

- *The Other End:*
 - Have you ever heard someone talking on the phone and tried to imagine what the other half of the conversation was like? Well, now is your chance to act on that! Eavesdrop on a phone conversation taking place and write down both sides of the conversation. Make sure to include both the side you overhear and the side you imagine.
- *TV Writer*
 - Turn on a TV program – pick one you are *not* familiar with – and watch for 5-10 minutes with the sound turned off. While you are watching, write down what you think the characters are saying to each other. Give yourself a chance to practice once without writing.

Your dialogue piece should be completed on a separate piece of paper. Please write the name of the exercise you chose at the top of your paper.

Here are some helpful questions you should consider while completing your chosen exercise:

- Who are these people?
- What do they want from each other (if anything)?
- What are their relationships to one another?
- Do they have a conflict?
- What interesting things will happen to them?
- How will it all end?

CHARACTER & DICTION, PART 2

Character: The people presented in the play that are involved in the movement of the plot. Each *character* has their own unique style and personality.

Diction: The word and language choices made by the playwright for the different characters. *Diction* helps us to define a character – to help an actor bring them to life.

Questions to ask yourself that will help clarify your *character*:

- Who is the story about?
- Who is this character?
- What is his or her relation to the other characters?
- What might this character say?
- Does this character have a secret?
- How does the character's background affect what he or she says?

Problems you may run into when it comes to *character*:

- ***Characters are not unique***
 - *What does this mean?* They do not have an individual way of speaking. All of your characters sound the same – they use the same slang, dialect; etc. All of the characters sound a lot like you (the playwright).
- ***Believability***
 - *What does this mean?* The characters do or say unbelievable things. They might do things that don't fit their general description without any reason at all.
- ***Too many characters***
 - *What does this mean?* There are characters in your scene and/or play that are unnecessary to the story being told. Too many characters can make the story confusing and make it more difficult for you to write.
- ***Characters are not fully developed***
 - *What does this mean?* Characters are incomplete or not "whole". We are missing important details about them, which prevents an audience from connecting with them and caring about what happens to them.

THE IMPORTANCE OF REWRITING

Rewriting is one of the most difficult and essential parts of playwriting. It can be difficult to rewrite something you worked very hard on; however, it's important to remember this:

Revision is about possibilities, not mistakes.

Your first draft is always an achievement; however, rewriting your work can only strengthen it.

Principles to Write By

1. Good playwriting may come from very humble beginnings.
2. Playwrights benefit greatly from hearing their work read aloud.
3. In the end, it's your scene and/or play.

CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESSFUL REWRITING

1. Have I written all the scenes the audience needs to see and hear?
2. Do I need any scenes before or after this one to help develop character and/or conflict?
3. Is the play focused on the main character and conflict? If not, how can I focus it?
4. Are conflict and character developed through the dialogue?
5. Have I provided settings?
6. Do the settings contribute to the action?
7. Does the audience get to know the characters well enough to care about them?
8. Are my characters different from each other?
9. Do the characters have their own speech patterns, styles, dialects, attitudes; etc? Is this clear in my writing?
10. Are there any characters I should eliminate because they aren't really necessary?
11. Do I know what my characters want? Will the audience know?
12. Have I thrown interesting and challenging obstacles into my characters' paths?
13. Do the characters change?
14. Have I avoided resolving the conflict too soon?
15. Is the audience always curious to know what happens next?

NAME: _____

PER: _____

BUILDING A CHARACTER

1. Give your character a name, age, and physical description.
2. Where does your character live?
3. What does your character like to do?
4. Name one thing that would make your character angry.
5. Describe a typical day for your character.
6. Describe a dream your character has had.
7. Pretend your character has a secret. Why is it a secret?
8. What is your character's goal?