

PLAYWRITING - GET RID OF MOVIE BRAIN



Get students thinking with a theatre brain, not a movie brain!

Movie Brain

When students start to write, their first instinct is to write with a movie brain: lots of short scenes, instant changes between locations, explosions, car chases, casts of thousands. This should be expected - movies are what they know. But movies are not

plays. When students fail by trying to shoehorn one form into another, they think they're poor writers.

How do you get students to separate movie writing from theatre writing?

What is Theatre?

Discuss the word "theatre." When you say the word theatre what are the first images that come to mind? A variety of answers come to mind:

stage

characters

costumes

Shakespeare

lines

the building

comedy/drama

When there is no one answer, it's difficult to say to a student, "Don't write movies, write theatre." What does that mean? Which definition do I follow?

When it comes to writing for the theatre stress one thing: stageability. What you write has to work on a stage. And not just any stage – your high school stage. Not Broadway. Not a movie set. Get your students to visualize their high school theatre and ask them what won't work on their particular stage: car crashes, battles and so on.

Theatricality

While the stage has certain limitations, it is possible to be very theatrical within those limitations. You can't have a moving car on stage, but you can have two characters sitting in two chairs side by side to represent a car. You can't have an full-scale haunted house on stage but through character action and reaction you can represent that location. Stageability and theatricality are key to moving students away from movie brain.

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Exercise

This is a concrete exercise to enforce stageability and theatricality. It illustrates both the limitations of the stage and the wealth of options within those limitations.

- Place a couple of simple set pieces (e.g. two chairs, a music stand, a bench, three blocks) on the stage or at the front of the class.
- Divide the class into groups.
- Assign a location to each group (e.g. amusement park ride, haunted house, tanning salon, jail, emergency room.)
- Each group must stage their location using only the simple pieces provided.
- The rest of the class has to guess the location.
- Encourage the use of action, character and dialogue to show the location. They're not allowed to say the name of the location in their piece. (e.g. If their location is an ice cream parlour, they can't walk in and say, "Can I have some ice cream?")

The "One" Rule

The "One" rule is extremely helpful with making student writing stageable. The "One" rule addresses time, location and action (think Aristotle's three unities).

- **One Place.** The play must take place in one location.
- **One Time.** The play must take place in real time (no use of five minutes later, two hours later)
- **One Moment.** There's one story that's happening on stage with no narrators, and no offstage action.

Students are certainly capable of writing multi-location, time-travelling plays. But if students are suffering from movie brain, the "One" rule can help them move toward a finished draft.