

WRITING YOUR RESEARCH



How do you make facts theatrical and statistics sound normal?

Many high school groups create plays based on topics that require research: teen issues, health issues, historical events. It can be a tricky tightrope to turn research into interesting drama.

Show Your Story

The first things we look for when researching a topic are statistics. The numbers can be quite alarming:

Suicide is the third leading cause of death for 15-to-24-year-olds.

Teen/youth suicide rates have tripled since 1970.

Approximately one-third of teens who die by suicide have made a previous suicide attempt.

It's understandable to want to include those stats in the play. But numbers are neither theatrical nor dramatic. No one uses statistics in everyday conversation, so they come off as artificial in dialogue. Seeing a character go through depression is much stronger than hearing a statistic on teen suicide.

Show your story, don't tell your story. Showing behaviours and actions allows an audience to connect and empathize. Instead of having a character recite a stat about suicide, have that character share in a monologue how he can't get up the energy to shower, how it doesn't seem worth it. A play that "shows" its topic with words or physical action creates images in the minds of the audience.

Exercise

Take this concept to the extreme. Consider these statistics:

2 out of 5 youths between 8 and 18 own a cellphone.

Students in grades 7-12 spend an average of an hour a day on the phone – same time as they do on homework.

The top third of cellphone users use their phones over 90 times a day.

Students are divided into groups. Each group chooses one of the statistics. Their job is to create a tableau for the statistic without showing numbers (e.g. holding up two and five fingers for the first stat). It's not going to be easy. Encourage groups to use their imagination, be abstract, be creative. Go for the extreme and see what happens.

Clearly your play won't be filled with tableaux, but approach facts and stats with that frame of mind. Create pictures. Show, don't tell.

Continued Over...

The Emotional Element

A play is not an information pamphlet. There are easier ways to get information about a topic than watching a play. So the play has to be more than information. The emotional element in a play is what draws an audience in, much more so than the topic itself. Showing a character's emotional reaction to a topic is always more dramatic than a narrator quoting facts and figures.

Exercise

Consider this statement:

1.5 million college grads expected to have a harder time landing a job this year.

In groups, create a short scene that shows characters having an emotional reaction to this fact. The only rule is that you can't quote anything from the fact. Put the characters in a situation where they are living the fact and reacting to it.

The Opposite Emotion

Issue plays, for the most part, are dramas. There aren't many funny issues. Because of that, it's extremely important to find moments of lightness in the writing. Without lightness the play will drag the audience down a dark path they didn't want to travel on. That's when they shut down. Life is full of ups and downs and opposing reactions. People don't always react the 'right' way in a serious situation. Also, from a structural point of view, it's more effective to make an audience laugh before socking them in the gut with something dramatic.

Exercise

This exercise takes the opposite emotion concept to the extreme. In groups, create a scene. The group is standing at the graveside of a friend who has committed suicide. Come up with a funny moment. It's not about making fun, but finding something light in the situation. The aim is to focus on the opposite, the different reactions people have in moments of crisis.

Don't Drown!

It can be easy to drown underneath the pile of information on a topic, especially when dealing with an historical person or event. You don't want to fall into the trap of "this happened and then this happened and then this happened and so on..." You don't want the history to take over the story.

Sometimes the best thing to do once the research is complete, is to let it go off to the side. Let the writing lead the way rather than the information. You can always go back and check your notes afterwards.

Exercise

Provide the class with the following information about the Omaha Beach invasion (WWII):

June 6, 1944. Landed at 6am.

Beach one of the longest – 6 miles. Huge cliffs provided advantage point for Germans.

Met with heavy fire. Within 10 minutes, 1st infantry division suffered huge losses, every officer or sergeant killed or wounded.

Almost all the tanks sank, with crew. They were supposed to provide cover for the soldiers.

Strong winds, waves up to 6ft, breakers were 3-4 feet. Wind and current scattered units.

Continued Next...

Over 2,000 lost. Men would be injured and then swept out with the tide.

Soldiers carried: weapon, life preserver, gas masks, five grenades, TNT, six rations, canteen, first aid kit, knife.

Tell students they have one minute to study the facts. Then have students turn their pages over. They must write a monologue (it must be from a character's perspective rather than a third person story) based on what they remember. The key is to not stop writing, this is an exercise not a finished product. What information finds its way into the writing?

To be dramatic with research you must, to use a cliché, step outside the box. Always remember the medium. A play is an interaction between characters, not a list of facts. Let the history, the statistics, the issue inform the play instead of the other way around.