



Sample Pages from
How to Write a Play for your Students

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HOW TO WRITE A PLAY

for Your Students



Theatrefolk®

Lindsay Price

How to Write a Play for Your Students
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INTRODUCTION

You have been in this situation. You want to produce a play with your students BUT:

- You can't find the exact right play to fit the number of students you have.
- You can't find the exact right play that fits your students thematically.
- You can't find the exact right play to fit your space.
- You don't have the budget for scripts and royalties.

And because of these barriers, you may choose to not put on a play.

As a drama teacher, someone might ask you, *Why don't you just write a play?* As if that's a task you could fit in while trying to execute your full-time job, or as if writing a play is so easy you could do it in your sleep. It is an assumption that all drama teachers have heard. But I have met many teachers who dislike/fear playwriting, mostly because their writing was harshly criticized when they were in school.

A fear of writing is natural — ask your students how they feel about writing. Many students think playwriting is beyond them. *I'm not creative enough to write a play. I'm not talented.* They think playwriting is a special talent that you're either born with or you're not. **But talent and creativity are two different things.** While talent is a natural ability, creativity is the use of an idea in a unique way. If you have students who use the *I'm not creative* defense, emphasize this definition of creativity. Put it on a poster in your classroom and refer to it often. If you want to write a play, say to yourself: *I am creative. I can use ideas in a unique way. Talent and creativity are different things.*

You also need a writing plan. Playwriting is not magic. Ideas are not unicorns that slide down a rainbow and appear on the page. There are writers who have a natural ability, but there are just as many writers who use a step-by-step process from idea to outline to first draft to character development to rewrites to final product. When they follow a writing plan, students can move from idea to final draft and so can you.

Playwriting should be approached as a skill, rather than a talent. The more you practice the act of writing (getting words on the page) in companion with the craft of writing (writing monologues and scenes), the better you get at it. The better you get, the more you will believe in your ability to complete a production-ready script. Because what truly makes a writer is not talent. It is the ability to finish the work. That's another statement you can say to yourself often: *I don't believe in my talent; I believe in my ability to finish a play.*

As you read this resource, your main goal is to develop a specific plan that will allow you to complete a draft. The included suggestions, tasks, and exercises are not the only way to navigate from idea to finished product. Everyone's situation is different and that is going to

affect your process. For example, you will need to address the following:

- How will you manage your writing time with your teaching schedule?
- Are you writing for specific students?
- Will you ask students for feedback? Will you need to teach them how to critique constructively?
- How will you maintain interest and not let the project die?

You can write a play. Not only that, you can write a play that meets the needs of your situation and the needs of your students. Let's get started.

ACTIVITY: Pre-Writing Reflection

Before you begin, what do you think the writing process will be like?

1. Reflect on the statement: Talent and creativity are two different things.
2. Write down your writing myths. What do you believe makes a great writer?
3. When you think of a "great" writer, who do you see? Describe this mythical writer. Who is this person? What's the most archetypal name you could give them? What do they look like? How old are they? What are their likes and dislikes? What's their writing day like? What makes them great?
4. Write a conversation between you and the mythical writer. What would they say to you to discourage you from writing? What would you say back? How would you stand up for yourself? When the mythical writer tells you to stop writing, or tells you that you could never write a good play, what would you do?
5. Reflect on the difference between the myth of being a writer and the reality.
6. Finish this sentence: "When it comes to writing, I believe in my ability to..." Aim for half a page.
7. Finish this sentence: "When I think of what it means to be creative I..." Aim for half a page.
8. Finish this sentence: "I want to take on this project because..." Aim for half a page.

WHAT TO FIGURE OUT BEFORE YOU START WRITING

TIME MANAGEMENT

The first step is to address your time. This may seem counterintuitive. *Aren't we supposed to start with the idea? Aren't we supposed to be creative from the beginning?*

You know more than anyone that your time is precious. Your time is also highly scheduled; the requirements of your job will always come before writing. To that end, you have to figure out how to fit writing into your schedule, and the overall timeline for the project. If you don't, the writing probably won't happen, and that's when you'll become frustrated and drop the project.

Establish a writing timeline and end goal. If your end goal is a production, identify dates for the following production requirements:

- When would you like to present your play?
- How long do you have to teach?
- How many weeks of rehearsals do you have?
- When is your first rehearsal?
- When are your auditions?

Then, identify dates for the following writing requirements you need to meet before you start rehearsals:

- How long do you want to give yourself to rewrite? (Add a month to that time.)
- Will you do a workshop midway through the writing process?
- When will you do a script reading?
- When will you finish your first draft?

Keep in mind that playwriting doesn't always stick to a timeline. Sometimes writing goes well and sometimes it doesn't, whether you've been writing for five minutes or fifty years. Expect and embrace this.

However, if your plan is to produce, a timeline is your best friend. You don't want to write and rehearse at the same time. When I say "write" in this context, I mean writing your first draft. Changes will happen during rehearsals, which we'll discuss later. By the time you've scheduled your auditions, you want to have a production-ready draft that you've heard read aloud, perhaps seen on its feet in a workshop, and received feedback on.

Always give yourself more time to write than you think you need, especially for your first play. It's better to have a draft a month ahead of time than scribble frantically at the last second. Besides, writing is always going to take second, third, or even fourth place to the other responsibilities in your life. Give yourself time to deal with any unexpected barriers to writing.

TIMELINE SUGGESTIONS

An example of a timeline with an October production date is to start writing in January, finish the first draft by March, do a reading with your students to get feedback before the end of the school year, rewrite over the summer, and you'll be ready for August/September auditions.

Another possibility is to spend the summer writing a first draft, do a reading in August/September to get feedback, and this will give you a long lead time for rewrites for a February/March production.

HOW TO FIT WRITING INTO YOUR SCHEDULE

A timeline is all well and good, but then you actually have to do the writing. How do you fit writing into your already packed schedule? That's the hard part. It may be the hardest part because it means you'll have to write when you don't want to. **This is the secret to writing.** Professional writers aren't special. Talent doesn't give people magical writing powers. What sets professional writers apart is that they write when they don't want to. They write on a consistent basis. They form a writing habit.

A habit of writing is what will result in a finished draft, rather than talent or inspiration. When it comes to writing, talent and inspiration are fair weather friends. If you wait for them to arrive, you'll never finish your play. The good news is that writing on a consistent basis doesn't mean writing for eight hours every day. That's not feasible. Yes, regular writing sessions are key, but the length of those sessions will depend on your schedule. Perhaps it's only five minutes every day. Will it take longer to write your play five minutes at a time? Of course. But if you're consistent and habitual in your writing, you will finish. Consistency is what forms habits. Don't pay attention to writers who say they write 9–5 without issue or finish a draft in a week. Writing is an individual pursuit and everyone gets the job done differently.

We all have habits. Shower in the morning before breakfast. Brush your teeth before going to bed. Look both ways before crossing the street. We don't think about these actions; we habitually do them. They are part of the natural rhythm of our life. Most habits are taught to us by our parents when we're young. Learning a habit as a child is easy.

As an adult, learning new habits becomes increasingly difficult. Having to do something — exercise, meditate, write — every day to create a habit is exhausting. Your mind will try to talk you out of it: *Why bother, it's going to take too long. There's no point.* When you're trying to imprint behavioural change and it doesn't happen immediately (or even in the mythical "21 days to create a habit" time frame) it's easy to become discouraged. But creating a habit as an adult is not impossible.

ACTIVITY: Adult Habits

Think about something you've learned as an adult. Have you incorporated any habits into your life? (E.g., changing what you eat, exercise, meditation) Reflect on learning this habit:

- Why did you choose this particular habit?
- What did you hope to accomplish?
- What was it like to learn this habit?
- What was difficult about the learning process?
- What was easy about the learning process?
- How many tries did it take to fully incorporate this habit into your life?
- If you faltered, why?
- How did you feel about incorporating this habit into your life?
- Is this habit incorporated into your life now? Why or why not?
- What did you learn about this process that you could use to create a writing habit?

ACTIVITY: Your Inside Voice

How often do you talk yourself out of doing things? Do you have an inner voice that hates repetition?

- Personify your inner voice and turn them into a character. What do they look like? Sound like? Smell like? Do they remind you of anyone you know? Visualize this character. Take a moment to write down your thoughts.
- Write a conversation between yourself and your inner voice. When they say something negative to you about your writing, how will you respond? What will you do?

So how do you create a habit and fit writing into your schedule? There is no formula for when you should write. The right time is when you have time, or when you're at your best mentally. For example, if you're a morning person, set your alarm ten minutes earlier than normal and write in bed. If you're a night owl, establish a bedtime writing ritual. If you have an erratic schedule or a lot of responsibilities, put writing time in your calendar. Turn writing into an appointment that you can't cancel. Set an alarm so you can't ignore it. This doesn't mean writing should feel like a chore. Think *I get to write* as opposed to *I have to write*. If writing every day feels like an obligation, ask yourself if you truly want to write.

PRACTICE MONTH

Writing consistently is not something you'll immediately be good at. It's a skill. If you've never written every day, I suggest adding a practice month to the beginning of your timeline. Practice writing every day for 10 minutes. Look at your schedule and decide when this is going to happen. Make it an appointment you can't get out of.

What should you write during your practice month? To practice the "act" of writing is to get words on the page. Here are some suggestions:

- Go to Google news and choose a category. Choose a news headline. Identify two characters who could appear in the story and write a one-page conversation between the two characters. It can have something to do with the headline story, but it doesn't have to. Write a one-page, one-location, two-character scene.
- Listen to a different style of music every day and write a one-page, one-location, two-character scene. Let the style and tone influence the way your characters talk and the content of the scene.
- Find an image of a specific environment. Use this as the "where" for your scene.
- Find a piece of classical art with people in it. Write the inner monologue of one of the people in the painting.
- Write a half-page monologue every day with a different emotional tone. Every monologue you write should have the opposite emotional core than the one before. Create a character and give them a name, age, location, and person to talk to.
- Spend the first fifteen days writing monologues and then turn the monologues into one-page scenes.

Don't worry about the content. You are not writing your play; you are practicing the act of writing. Your sole task is to get words on the page, every day. There is no "good" or "bad" writing here. It's all great because you are writing consistently.

Learn to embrace the act of writing at this stage rather than the quality of your writing. Learn to embrace anything you interpret as "bad" writing as a valid part of the process. It's all useful. It's all helpful. It's all writing.

Teaching Resources

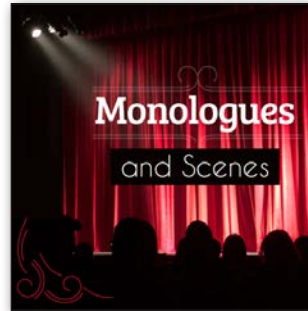
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theatrefolk.com/companion

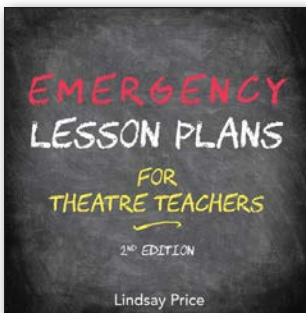


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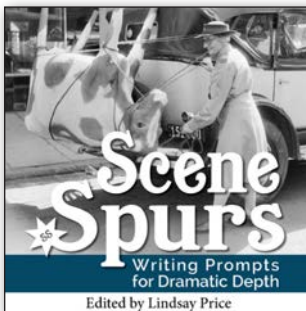
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The Student Director's Handbook

Help students take their show from first audition to opening night with *The Student Director's Handbook*. This easy-to-use ebook is full of guidelines, tips and templates designed to help students create a vision, circumvent problems and organize rehearsals on their way to a successful production.

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Scene Spurs is a collection of photo-based writing prompts developed by playwright Lindsay Price. The set includes 35 different Spurs along with an instruction guide to integrate them into your drama classroom.

theatrefolk.com/spurs

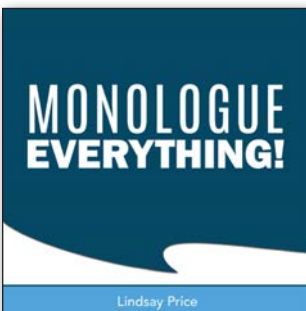


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