Playwriting 101 by John Dorf

http://www.playwriting101.com/

The Play's the Thing

The stage is a magical place. Live actors and a live audience make for an immediacy no other art of the written word can duplicate. The ancient Greeks and Romans believed that the dramatic "poet" (that's us) had the power and the duty to "teach and to please," and it's a tradition that lives on to this day. Sounds great. But how do you do it?

Before your play can teach and please anyone, you have to write it, rewrite it (probably over and over again), submit it to theaters and hope that one of them will want to produce it. It can be a long road, particularly because now more than ever, plays tend to get plenty of development (i.e. readings and workshops) before getting fully produced. Good playwrights typically have patience and perseverance to spare.

Types of Plays

Plays come in all shapes and sizes. Here are the most common ones:

Ten-Minute Plays

Ten-minute plays have become very popular in recent years with the advent of The Actors Theatre of Louisville contest. A good ten-minute play is not a sketch or an extended gag, but rather a complete, compact play, with a beginning, middle and end. It typically takes place in one scene and runs no more than ten pages. In fact, because many contests disqualify entries with more than ten pages, it's a good idea to adhere to that page limit religiously.

One-Act Plays

One-acts can run anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour or more. While technically, the one-act gets its name from having only one act (however long that might be), it's more commonly thought of as a play that isn't long enough to constitute a full evening. Arguably the most popular length for one-acts is around a half-hour. At this length, a play can fit on a bill with a pair of other one-acts, and if your play is suitable for high school production, thirty minutes is a good length for a competition play.

A good one-act focuses on one main action or problem; there's not time to get into complicated layers of plot. And for practical reasons, it's a good idea to keep your play to one set and as few scenes as possible. Why? Let's say that your one-act is on a bill with two other one-acts, a common scenario. Let's further say that your one-act has two distinct settings, requiring two different sets and a set change in the middle of an already short play. Not a good thing. Each of the other one-acts already has its own set requirements, so suddenly the theater is faced with building four different sets for one evening. Not likely to happen.
Another common situation is that a one-act precedes a play that's not quite long enough to be an evening unto itself. My play *The White Pages* opened for Steve Martin's *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* and had to make use of largely the same set, with canvases painted like bookcases and a desk brought on to make it look more like a bookstore. So the moral of the story is to write your one-act with the most minimal set and technical demands possible.

**Different Theater Spaces**

Not every theater space is the same, and it pays to be aware of the types of spaces in which your play might be produced. Often, plays work better in some spaces than others. Keeping in mind that many theater spaces are hybrids, here are the basics:

**Proscenium**

Effectively, the actors perform with the audience sitting in front of them. Either the stage is raised above the level of the audience (for example, in many high schools) or the seats in the "house" are raked (in other words, the farther away from the stage your seat is, the higher up you get). Most theaters - everything from Broadway to high schools - are prosceniums.

**Thrust**

Imagine a tongue thrusting into a proscenium-style audience and you have a thrust configuration. In this configuration, though this may not be true of the extreme upstage area, the actors will have audience on three sides.

**In the Round**

The actors are in a central playing area, and the audience surrounds them on all sides. Actors may have to enter and exit through the aisles.

**Black Box**

A black box is a performance space that is exactly what it sounds like: a black-painted square or rectangle. A true black box - that is, one with no fixed seating - is the ultimate in flexibility, because the theater can configure the audience arrangement to match the staging needs of your play, rather than staging your play around the audience.

**Touring**

A "touring" space isn't a kind of space at all, but if your show needs to tour - (e.g. to schools) that means it could be performed in anything from a giant proscenium auditorium to a densely packed classroom - it's a good idea to observe some common sense guidelines:

1. No sets, or sets that can be installed and taken down in minutes, and transported in a deep trunk or a van.
2. Props and costumes that can be packed into a large box for easy transport.
3. No lighting cues beyond "lights up" (if that), and only sound cues that can be done from a boombox.
4. Small cast (anything larger than four is begging for trouble).
5. Forty to forty-five minutes running time (for high schools, and fewer for younger children), to fit into one class period.

Story Structure

Scenes or Acts?

Should you divide your play into acts, or just into scenes? It's really a matter of personal taste, as long as you recognize a few basic principles of play construction and why we have these divisions in the first place.

Virtually all plays, as much as we rail against the way some screenwriters have turned this into a cookie-cutter, divide into what has come to be called three-act structure. Here's where you get to impress your friends with your fancy verbiage:

- The first act is the Protasis, or exposition.
- The second act is the Epitasis, or complication.
- The final act is the Catastrophe, or resolution.

Just as in screenwriting format, the middle act is the longest. Aristotle (384-322 BCE.), whose Poetics represented his collected observations on dramatic structure and playwriting based on the practice of Greek dramatists, is largely credited for three-act structure and has had long-lasting influence on playwriting. Want to really, really impress your friends? Tell them Aristotle didn't say anything about three Unities.

So what does this three-act structure mean? It means that no matter whether you label the divisions in your script acts or scenes, the arc of a good play will be roughly the same. Logically, though, if you're writing a play that is not meant to have an intermission, it makes sense simply to have scenes, whereas if you expect to have an intermission, put it between two acts. Of course, you could also put an intermission between scenes if you prefer. You have options. You even have options when it comes to structure.

Write to be Read

One of the terms you'll hear a lot from me is "your reader." But plays are meant to be performed, not read - right? True, but before your play makes it to a stage, it will have to survive a small army of readers. For example, when I was reading for Robert Brustein's American Repertory Theatre, a play typically had to get through at least two script readers before it reached the head of new play development. If it got through him, it would go either to the literary manager or to the associate artistic director or perhaps to Brustein himself. That's a lot of reads, so it's crucial that you write not just to be performed, but to be read as well.
Story Development

Writing off the top of our head sometimes is great to capture a fleeting idea. But real planning and preparation work can save the writer a lot of frustration and backpedaling at a later date. Outlining and breaking down the dramatic elements of a story are well worth the effort. By playing contrasts and conflict to maximum effect the playwright can stir the primal in us.

There are so many ways to approach an idea. And the actual activity of logging in the possibilities is not a pleasant task. But having an easy and systematic method to catalog ideas, dialogue, and other snippets is like having an assistant available at all time to do your bidding. In recent years software developers have created products to simplify this process; some are for outlining/brainstorming and others specifically organize dramatic elements under a theoretical umbrella. Whatever method you choose here is a "Top Ten Tip' List for you:

1. Create a world that's true to real life or fantastical or that mixes the mundane with the magical. But whatever set of rules you create for that world, make sure you follow them.
2. Write a conflict that builds as the play progresses. As you structure the conflict, think in terms of your play having a beginning, a middle and an end.
3. Write characters that want something (which puts them in conflict with other characters) and try to get what they want at every moment.
4. Make sure that each character has something at stake, a consequence if he doesn't get what he wants.
5. Create a "ticking clock" that puts the characters under pressure to get what they want right away.
6. Make sure there is a good reason, an "event," for your play. It's not enough for two characters to sit around and talk for a while and then leave. There needs to be some important reason why we're watching them now, at this particular moment.
7. Write dialogue that illuminates your characters and advances the plot at the same time.
8. Make each character speak in a distinctive voice. If you have trouble with that, try imagining a specific actor you know - even if it's someone who will never play the part - in the role.
9. Do not have a character tell us something she can show us instead. For example, it's much more effective to hide under the bed than to say "I'm afraid."
10. Give each character a "moment," something that justifies the character's existence in your play and that makes him attractive for an actor to play.

What Should My Play Look Like?

Playwrights and the people who read their work have never adopted an ironclad, industry-wide format, maybe because theater, by its nature, tends toward the revolutionary and can't bear to become establishment. Maybe we're just not that organized.

But even if there's not one, absolutely must-follow format, there are definitely common-sense formatting principles of "readability" that must be respected. If a work is going to
be read by potentially many people you must place the words on the page in the most familiar manner. This will assure the reader that an experienced writer is behind the work and that same writer will not burden the reader with unusual markings, fonts, or margins. Here is a general rendering of Manuscript Format.

**Manuscript Format Elements**

**The Rules:** Manuscript format is the *only* format to use when you are submitting your script to theater companies, contests, publishers, agents and other theater opportunities. The guiding principle here is easy reading.

- Title Page
- Cast Page
- Musical Numbers Page (musicals only)
- Act/Scene Heading
- At Rise Description
- Character Name
- Dialogue
- Stage Directions
- Transition

No particular font, like the Courier 12 point in screenwriting, is the rule. I prefer Times Roman for its ease of reading, but Courier or any other simple, clear font is acceptable. Cursive fonts or handwritten corrections are not acceptable. Whichever font you choose, though, keep the size at 12 points for reading ease.

**Play Page Layout**

**The Rules:**

- Use 8.5" by 11" paper (3 hole punch if possible).
- Top and bottom margins are about 1".
- Right margin is also 1". Left margin, where the binding is, is approximately 1.5".
- Page numbering starts on page 2, place a page number in the upper right hand corner (in the header).
- Do not number the Cast Page.

Note: See International Submission setting at end of document.

**Title Page Element**

**The Rules:** Vertically centered on the page, type the play's title in all Caps, centered directly below type your name in mixed case.

Keep your title page simple - no oversized letters, color or fancy graphics
Cast Page Element

Use the standard page margin, without page number. Capitalizing the character names helps set them apart - you may even wish to write them in bold. If the character description wraps onto a second line, use a .5" hanging indent.

The Rules: This is the readers' and potential producer or director's reference page.

- Detail your characters' age, gender and anything else that is essential to casting.
- If necessary include a little spin on "who" your characters are.
- Include whether one actor is meant to play multiple characters (referred to as Multiple Casting).
- Do not write exhaustive descriptions of the characters' behavior; you have to show this in the play.

Here you can also include any setting information, whether there's an intermission in your play, or no obvious act break. If you want the play to run without intermission, tell us that too. Here's the Cast Page from my play Milk and Cookies.

Cast of Characters

MARGE NANCY REAGAN BALLMOTH, harried thirty-something mother
JACKIE, her ten-year-old son, played by the actor who plays Rufus
BRUCE, the average-looking man from the milk carton and about Marge's age
BLONDIE, a youngish, not necessarily blond woman
MARGE'S HUSBAND, about Marge's age and played by the actor who plays Rufus
RUFUS, a thirty something mysterious freelance version of the witness protection program living in Montana

The play takes place over several days in various suggested settings in California, Nevada, Idaho and Montana.

Act/Scene Heading Element

Typically, Act/Scene Headings are very simple. Act numbers are traditionally written in Roman numerals, while Scene numbers are written as Arabic numbers. Text of both Act and Scene are written in all CAPS and centered on the line. In the past playwrights used to underline these headings, but boldface type stands out better.

The Rules: If you're writing a ten-minute or one-act play with only one scene, you don't need to use Act/Scene headings. But if you're writing a one-act play with multiple scenes or a multi-act play, you need to give your reader some road signs.
Look at it below:

ACT I

SCENE 1

If a play is a one-act, cut the Act Heading (obviously) and just use the Scene Heading. Now, you're ready for the...

Setting and At Rise Description Element

Typically, the At Rise and Setting Description are left indented at approximately 3.25" (a little more than half across the page,) running to the right margin.

The Rules: When your play, or any new scene or act, begins, the reader wants to know the Setting and who and what is seen on stage. This At Rise Description is so named because it refers to the raising of the curtain most theaters used to have. While these days curtains are mostly reserved for large, proscenium houses, such as on Broadway, we still need to know what the stage looks like when the lights come up. Older formats would often call for the Setting and the At Rise Description to be separated, but these days we tend to put them together.

At RISE:

(A kitchen/living room somewhere in California. Early evening. MARGE, thirty something mother, stops to scrutinize the carton before pouring milk into a bowl of flour. On the table are four place settings, one of which includes a martini.)

From the above description, your reader knows the setting (place and time) of the play, as well as who and what occupies the space when the play begins.

Use the At Rise margins each time a new scene or new act begins. Since the whole idea of starting a new scene is that either the place or time has changed - otherwise, you'd still be in the same scene - it's common sense to set the new scene for your reader with an At Rise description.

How to Describe the Setting

The amount of information playwrights include to set the scene varies incredibly. Here are a few examples:

(A deserted road on the outskirts of a not quite apocalyptic suburbia. Not quite five o'clock in the not so distant future. COWGIRL, late twenties and the Bonnie half of a Bonnie and Clyde team,
holds a syringe. Her hands shake.
COWBOY, about her age, holds backpack.)

In Beef Junkies above, I give a sense of the world of the play and the time of day, but "a deserted road" is as specific as I get about the set. But in the opening of The Wash, I give more detail.

(The laundry room of a New York apartment building. Friday night, around nine o'clock. A row of washing machines right. Opposite them, a row of dryers. Center, several chairs for those who wait. JUDITH, mid-twenties, puts her pocketbook is atop Agatha Christie's laundry in a washing machine. Her Dead Man's Folly inside her empty laundry basket.)

The Stage

Notice the use of the terms "right" and "center," which along with "left" are theatrical shorthand for Stage Right, Stage Left and Center Stage. Right and left always refer to the actors' right and left, and center is the center of the stage. Sometimes you'll also see "upstage" or "downstage," or their shorter forms, *up and *down. The latter terms get their names from the early days of theatre, when stages were raked, and if you walked toward the back of the stage, you literally walked up, and if you walked toward the audience, you were walking down. Few raked stages exist, but we still use the terms.

Character Name Element

Characters' names may appear in two ways: before dialogue and contained in the stage directions. Character names that precede dialogue are always capitalized aligned at a 2.5" tab stop. In stageplays, opposed to screenplays, you are permitted to use boldface to further set the character name apart.

PERRY

They were your dogs. And Rover just ran away. We don't even know for sure he's dead.

MARLA

It's been two years.

PERRY

Probably found an owner who fed him more than Diet Dog.

For character names that appear in the stage directions you have the choice of two formats. The first format is like screenwriting: the character name is in all CAPS the first time it is introduced in the stage directions, after that it's always in mixed case. For example, I introduce Marla in this At Rise description.
(Late afternoon. A living room. MARLA, thirty something, holds a cardboard dog and looks out a window, which might be indicated by a hanging frame.)

But later in the play, I write

(Marla strokes the cardboard dog.)

The second way to format character names in stage directions is to use ALL CAPS throughout. It's a matter of personal preference: pick the format that seems most readable and stick with it.

**Dialogue Element**

Writing good dialogue is hard, but formatting it is easy. Dialogue, which is always mixed case, single-spaced, typically runs margin to margin and follows the character name on the next line. A blank line follows between the dialogue and the next character's name. A formatting program will do the spacing and margin adjusting automatically for you.

**COWGIRL**

The hamburger is ten feet tall.

**COWBOY**

It's not there.

**COWGIRL**

I know, but it's dripping fat, and it's sizzling. It's on a sesame bun, and you can just see some onion sticking out. There's a dab of ketchup on the onion. Maybe it popped out from under the bun. It's winking at me.

Sometimes stage directions interrupt dialogue, but each adheres to its own formatting rules. See below.

**COWGIRL**

Piece in your teeth. (She puts the finger with the fragment of the mystery meat into her mouth. She instantly spits it out.)

Ugh! Why'd you tell me it was beef?

**Continuing Dialogue**

If a character's dialogue is interrupted by a page break, and continues onto the next page, you repeat the character name set-up on the next page with the (cont'd) remark after the name. This is what formatting software was made for!

**LADY SHAKESPEARE**

And he fed the dog! Yeah, the dog ... I don't know ... No ... That population's on the ups every day, and we're gonna' get buried in garbage else ... That's why he's feedin' the dog ...
At the top of the next page:

**LADY SHAKESPEARE** (cont'd)

Don't tell me different. No, no, no ...  
(Shes sees Ben.)

There's little trash babies, all kinds, eatin' their lunch out of a garbage pail. I just know the Trash Man's comin'. Who thrown their babies to the garbage?

**Offstage Dialogue**

When a character walks offstage while speaking either notate this as part of the stage directions, or alongside the character name if the character is already offstage. You may write either "Offstage" or "Off."

**BAXTER**

Yeah. Sure.  
(Baxter exits to the kitchen. Off)

We mostly talk sports when he calls, 'cause he's into that. Talk a little wrestling, a little football - he's a linebacker. Not a real good team - I snuck over to see a game once. They're small. Josh is real fast. If they had some other real fast kids they might be good. But now football's almost over and it's time for wrestling.

...or...

**HOLLY** (off)

You still have to bandage it.

**Interruptions**

When one character interrupts another, use double dashes (--) or an em dash (a long dash) to show that the speaker is being cut off. Below, I make use of an em dash. No need to write "interrupts."

**HUGO**

If my Dad said we're moving just like that -

**CHARLIE**

You'd move. Hold this cone  
(holds out the ice cream cone)

a sec?

Using ellipses ( ... ) does not signify that a character has been interrupted, but rather that she hesitates or trails off of her own accord. For example, in *Shining Sea*, Pac can't bring himself to ask a question:

**PAC**

Would you ... ?

**CANDY**
Would I what?

Emphasizing Dialogue

Occasionally, the actor's emphasis on a particular word may be so important that you want to write that direction into the script. While there is no ironclad rule for this practice, italicizing the word to be emphasized works best (underlining or capitalizing the word is both confusing and cramping). To use italics successfully, do not overuse them. Below is an example:

WENDY
You do? But she's my hallucination.

Simultaneous Dialogue

Sometimes characters speak at the same time. The rule of thumb is to divide your page into two columns, placing the character names within their individual columns. Indent any stage directions 1" instead of 2".

FLYER MAN
Only diamonds do the trick. Only diamonds do it. Say it with me: only diamonds do it. Say it.

FLYER MAN
Only diamonds do it.

BEN
Only diamonds do it.

Writing Tip: Make sure to punctuate very carefully. Through careful punctuation, and not by giving them line readings, is how you tell the director and the actor how your characters speak. A comma means something different than a period. Ellipses mean something different than an em dash. A period and a question mark make big differences in an actor's inflection. Control the rhythm of your play through the punctuation.

Stage Direction Element

Indent stage directions (except for At Rise directions) 2" from the left margin, and let them wrap at the right margin.

Stage directions always follow a blank line, and are either inserted single spaced within dialogue or on their own, between speakers, preceded and followed by a blank line. A format for stage directions is included with all script formatting softwares, making these transitions easy and headache-free.

Your stage directions are just as important as your dialogue. Remember that your reader will read them first, so make them concise and as readable as possible, perhaps even entertaining.

The Rules: Do not try to direct the play from the page by telling us what the character should be feeling or by giving abundant line readings.
Some writers like to write stage directions in complete sentences, while others prefer phrases. Punctuate accordingly. Whatever you do, use the active present tense.

**COWGIRL**

I could suck one. I could suck one for an entire day.

*(finishes looking through the backpack)*

Where is it?

*(Cowboy pulls a tiny piece of meat from his pants. He puts it in his mouth and tastes it.)*

**COWBOY**

Pork.

**Transition Element**

Since curtains are so rarely used, lighting has become the chief means of indicating the beginning and end of your play. Typically, "Lights up" is understood as the direction at the opening of any scene, so it's rarely written. However, a lights out direction usually *does* appear at the end of a scene or an act or the play. Among the common terms are "Lights fade" and "Blackout."

*Collisions in Air and Space* is divided into scenes rather than acts. The end of Scene 1 looks like this:

**MERC**

I know.

*(He pats Alex on the back and looks out the window. Beat)*

There's somebody under the window.

*(Alex joins him at the window as they look down. Blackout.)*

If it's the end of an act, it's a good idea to indicate that too. For example, in *Milk and Cookies*:

**BRUCE**

For?

**MARGE**

Rufus.

*(Blackout and end of Act I.)*

And then there's the end of the play. Here's the ending of *War of the Buttons*:

**WALKER**

Good war.

*(Beat.Exiting)*

**CHARLIE**

Yeah. You too.
(Walker exits. Beat. Charlie bites into the cone, then exits as the lights dim. End of play.)

Instead of "End of play," you may wish to cling to tradition and write "Curtain."

**Page Break Rules**

**The Rules:**

- Do not break dialogue or stage directions in mid-sentence.
- Do not page break between a character name and the dialogue that follows.
- See Continuing Dialogue for instructions about how to break in the middle of a character's dialogue.

Page Breaking rules like the above can be automatically dealt with. If there were any one software product that could truly be said to have changed the world for scriptwriters, it has been the 'Stand Alone Script Formatter.' These products store your character names, scene locations, margin settings, and CASE settings for all elements. They have note annotation, index card like viewing, voice read back of character dialogue, even online copyright registration. In other words, they let you concentrate on your writing by doing virtually everything else. The time you'll save makes this money very well spent.

**Conclusion - The 15th Commandment**

The playwriting ideas in the body of Playwriting 101 are the ones most common to today's playwriting mainstream, and as a writer just starting out, it's best to keep ideas like the need for conflict and the three-act structure in mind. In fact, beginners should probably stop reading here. But if you feel you've mastered the basics and are ready for a curveball, read on. Playwriting, more so than screenwriting, has always been a home for writers with unique ways of telling a story, or for writers who don't tell a story at all-on purpose.

For example, think of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, one of the greatest plays ever written. What's the conflict? There really isn't one. There's barely a story: it's just two guys waiting for a third man that never shows up. And by the end, nothing has happened. For the audience, the fun of the play is listening to the back and forth between Vladimir and Estragon as we slowly fill in the landscape of the world in which they live. This "landscape" structure works as an alternative to the more conventional conflict-crisis-resolution structure.

Some plays use a technique called "gapping" instead of lots of onstage conflict and plot. The scenes are episodes, and between each episode, time has passed, and things have changed. What happens during the scene, again, is that we as the audience fill in what these changes have been.

Or your play can be a "process" structured around some event. For example, two people wait for a bus. When the bus arrives, the play ends. Or maybe the play is a collection of characters, each following a story that happens at the same time as the others but seems disparate. In the end, all
of these stories meet and add up to one. Examples of this more "anecdotal" structure can be found in the work of the great Russian playwright Chekhov.

Does this mean that conflict and the three-act structure are dead? That we should throw out everything we thought we knew about playwriting? Of course not. But remember that there are only a limited number of plots out there (some people say seven, others fourteen, others thirty-six). Look at Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*, in terms of its plot, is just a cookie-cutter tale of forbidden love. What makes it great is the rich, often beautiful dialogue that Shakespeare creates, the wonderful moments between the characters, the variety of textures and moods in the scenes. That's what we remember-not what a clever story he wrote or how much conflict there was.

So what, practically speaking, is the Fifteenth Commandment? It's the commandment to know what really makes a play memorable to an audience, and to use that knowledge to free yourself as a writer. And hey-if you can write as well as Shakespeare, that wouldn't hurt either.