

"How to Write a Playscript"

by

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Your name
and address
go here
phone and/or e-mail as well

1-1-1

(These numbers connote the act, scene, and page number)

(Obviously, if it is a one-act play, you only need to number your pages 1-1 for scene and page number)

AT RISE: (Here is where you get to describe what is on the stage) The stage is set like the smallish office which is shared by a number of college professors. Two desks on opposite walls, two bookshelves to the sides of either desk, a phone on each desk, and a hopelessly out-of-date computer. There are stacks of books and ungraded student papers in relatively balanced piles on the desks, one higher than the other. A coffee-maker with a half-pot of day-old coffee is on one of the desks. Next to the other is a horizontal filing cabinet. None of the furniture looks new. As the lights come up we see one professor, bearded, working at the computer typing instructions on how to write a playscript for a friend of his, a former student.

(Sound effect: knock on door)

The man turns away from the keyboard at the sound, and propels himself in the chair, which is on casters, across the floor to the door, which he opens, revealing said former student.

ME

(sliding back across the floor to the computer)

Greg! How's it goin'?

GREG

(looks over ME's shoulder at the computer screen)

Hey! Cool! This is way better than some stupid book on the subject! I mean, I can't believe it!

ME

Yeah, well -- it's actually pretty frickin' simple. The two things -- no, make that three things -- you've gotta remember.

GREG

And what're they?

1-1-2

ME

You've got to be sure to capitalize characters' names every time you give them a line of dialogue or an action which they must undertake. But don't, as a general rule, give too much stage direction. Directors like to block the action for most of the stage movement. Major things, entrances, exits, dropping or breaking things.

GREG

Okay. That's one. What are the other two?

ME

I forget. I -- wait a minute. Oh, yeah.

GREG

You're geezin' on me, man!

ME

I already mentioned the pagination thing. That's so that if you rework a section of the script all you have to do is re-type the one page. If it fits perfectly in place of the old version, great, but if it doesn't -- say it's too short? Doesn't matter. The cast tears out the old page and put in the new. And if it's longer than the original, then you put a slug on it like 1-1-1-a and 1-1-1-b. That way everyone can keep track. It goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway, that you should bind your script with one of those recloseable covers where you slide the metal pieces down over the other thingies...

GREG
(laughs)

You're losing it, man!

1-1-3

ME

You've only just noticed that? Oh, that's right --I forgot -- you didn't come to class very often, did you?

GREG

Ohhh, that's harsh! But I'm goin' to all my classes this semester.

ME

(waves it away as just a joke)

Well that's something, then. So, are you gonna sit down or what?

GREG

Oh, yeah.

GREG places his back pack on the floor and sits

ME

And you want to format it so that you always put hard page-breaks in. And make sure it's in a large enough font size that the actors will have no trouble reading it in rehearsal or during blocking, before they're what they call "off-book."

GREG

Ah, yeah. Ya gotta be able to read it!

ME

And it helps if you've run spell check, of course.

GREG

So what's the other thing?

1-1-4

ME

It's a formatting thing too. Always indent your dialogue two full indentations from either margin. Roughly an inch. And center the capitalized names of the speakers a line above their dialogue so that there's space for parenthetical stage direction from you -- but only where absolutely necessary -- and blocking directions given to the cast in rehearsal by the director. They will customarily pencil these into their copies of the script. Otherwise, stage direction should almost always begin at the left-hand margin and go clear across to the other margin. This is a clear distinction that the actors should not be reading it aloud. Just one of the many conventions in theater.

GREG

And that's it?

ME

Pretty much. There are some interesting books you can read about theater and the craft of script writing, but pretty much what play-writing can do for you is hone your ear for dialogue. By doing away with everything but what's being said, you can really free up your imagination. Just one caveat, though.

GREG

What's that?

1-1-5

ME

You've got to make it interesting. You've got to make the audience your partner in maintaining the fiction that this is reality they're looking at. In the theater world they call it "the willing suspension of disbelief." Once you've achieved that, it's all downhill. And it doesn't matter how avantgarde the piece is, or how outrageous, as long as the audience participates in the fraud that's being perpetrated on them.

GREG

I can dig it, man.

They shake hands as GREG gets up, lifts his backpack from the floor, and makes for the door.

ME

Aren't you forgetting something?

GREG

Yeah? What?

ME

(pushing a button on the mouse)

I was going to print you out a copy of this.

(sound effect: computer printer beginning to run)

GREG

You are too cool.

1-1-6

ME

(handing GREG the paper from the printer)
You don't have to suck up -- you're not in my class anymore.

GREG

(gives a thumbs up sign and opens the door)
Oh yeah. See ya.

GREG exits and the door swings slowly closed behind him.

ME

(turning back to the computer)
Later. Now, where was I?

Lights come down and we
fade to black

end Act One, Scene One

1-1-4a

ME

It's a formatting thing too. Always indent your dialogue two full indentations from either margin. Roughly an inch. And center the capitalized names of the speakers a line above their dialogue so that there's space for parenthetical stage direction from you -- but only where absolutely necessary -- and blocking directions given to the cast in rehearsal by the director. Otherwise, stage direction should almost always begin at the left-hand margin and go clear across to the other margin. This is a clear distinction that the actors should not be reading it aloud. Just one of the many conventions in theater.

GREG

And that's it?

ME

Pretty much. There are some interesting books you can read about theater and the craft of script writing –

GREG

Books? Like what books?

ME

Well, like Lajos Egri's *The Art of Dramatic Writing*. And Another good one is Boleslavsky's *Acting: The First Six Lessons*.

1-1-4b

GREG

(writing them down)

Hang on. Okay, you were saying something about the craft of Script writing...

ME

Oh, yeah. What play-writing can do for you is hone your ear for dialogue, doing away with everything but what's being said. You can really free up your imagination. Just one caveat, though.

GREG

What's that?