

YOUNG PLAYWRIGHTS FESTIVAL PLAYWRITING TIPS

A play is a story about a set of characters told through action and dialogue. A play asks a question or poses a problem that the characters need to answer or solve. When writing your play, think about these important questions and tips:

- ◆ Who is the main character, or **protagonist**, of your play? In other words, who is your play about? Establishing a main character will clarify his/her purpose within the play, as well as his/her relationships to the other characters. Think in detail about your characters' biographies and individual traits.
- ◆ What does your main character **want**? The main character's "want" will keep the **plot**—or what happens in the story—moving. The "want" does not have to be something tangible, like money or goods. Instead, the protagonist might want praise, or revenge, or respect. What do the other characters in your play want? Is it the same or different from the main character?
- ◆ The main character **must** face challenges, or **obstacles**, in trying to get what s/he wants. This will create **conflict** in your play. Conflict is not necessarily an argument, but the tension that's created when two opposing forces meet. What (or who) prevents the main character from getting what s/he wants?
- ◆ What is the main character's **action**, in other words, what does s/he **do** to try to get what s/he wants? How many different **tactics** does the character use to try to get his/her want? A character could plead, lie, distract, or compromise with another character. There are thousands of tactics a character might try. **Tension** is created when "the stakes are raised," that is, when a tactic doesn't work, making the "want" more urgent and motivating the character to try again—with a new tactic.
- ◆ Does your story have a natural **climax**, or turning point, which shows the audience whether the main character will, in the end, achieve his/her "want"? Be selective in your storytelling—include only the most crucial and exciting details of the story to dramatize onstage. This way, you'll sustain audience interest and **suspense**.
- ◆ **Show, Don't Tell!** A play is meant to be **seen**, and not simply heard, by an audience. Your best strategy is to **show** the audience the important actions, events, and emotions experienced by your characters. That means avoiding narration (telling the audience about an offstage event, for example) and devices like phone calls (instead, get those characters onstage together in a scene).
- ◆ What is the play about? In other words, what is its **theme**?
- ◆ Does your play have a **beginning, middle, and end**? Remember that one part must flow into the next. Does each transition make sense? For example, does the ending, or **resolution**, happen too quickly?

(continued on reverse)

- ◆ Remember that, unlike a novel or short story, a play is designed to be spoken out loud. Does the *dialogue* sound natural? Can an actor easily speak it? Can one character's dialogue be distinguished from another's dialogue? Each character should have an individual *voice*—which refers to the *way* a character talks, not literally to how his/her voice sounds out loud. If readers can tell which character is speaking without referring to your character headings, then you have developed individual voices for your characters.
- ◆ Have you given enough information for the audience to understand the basic story? Most of your story and information should be told through dialogue and character action (a mother and daughter hugging shows and tells that they care for each other). Include *stage directions* for any additional information your reader must be able to understand and visualize, for example, character entrances and exits, *props* (any object that an actor handles, such as glasses, or that decorates the set, such as books), *costumes* (anything an actor wears), etc.
- ◆ What is the play's *setting*? A play can move from setting to setting (like from inside a living room to outside on the sidewalk), but too many switches become difficult to do onstage. Think about how your play can be staged in a live theatre, which is much different than how a story can be told on film. Things like car rides or chases, entire football fields, shifting instantly from one location to another, and watching a character walk down the street and enter one store after another are easy to show on film but impossible to stage literally in the theatre. Visualize the action as you're writing—how can you write it in a way that it can be put on a live stage?
- ◆ *Writing is re-writing.* In other words, be prepared to *revise*. A play is never complete in its first draft. Have someone you trust read your play and provide feedback. That is a great way to get ideas or fix problem spots. Use the re-writing process to answer incomplete questions, to clarify issues that might confuse your reader, to heighten your conflict for a more exciting play, and to strengthen the playwriting elements mentioned above.
- ◆ *Read some plays,* preferably out loud with your friends and family playing the different parts. Tell a story that excites you and, with some work, you're sure to be able to excite your audience. Your local library has many plays available, and the best way to understand how plays are put together is to read some yourself.
- ◆ *Have fun!* Tell a story that excites you and, with some work, you're sure to be able to excite your audience.