**Playwriting 101**

**Chapter 1**

**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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#playwright) 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**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#ten-minute-play)

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**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#one-act-play)

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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#scene) 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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#setting), requiring two different [sets](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#set) 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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#technical-demands)possible.

[**Full-Length Plays**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#full-length-play)

Full-length plays are also called [evening-length plays](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#evening-length-play), because they're long enough to be their own evening. How long is that? Anywhere from around seventy or eighty minutes and up. How up is up? These days, with TV shrinking our attention spans, you'd better have a very good reason to keep an audience in the theater for much longer than two hours. And it's *always* a good idea to write your play so that it can be produced, if necessary, with minimal set and technical requirements. This doesn't mean that an ambitious [designer](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#designer) can't go to town on your script if that possibility exists, but if producing your play requires eight set changes or filling the stage with water, most theaters will not be able to afford you.

[**Musicals**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#musical)

Musicals can run the gamut in length from ten minutes (though these are rare, because it's not very cost effective to assemble a band to play for only ten minutes) to three hours. Again, the middle ground - somewhere between ninety minutes and two hours, is probably the one to shoot for.

**Chapter 2**

**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**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#touring-play)

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.

**Chapter 3**

**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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#exposition).
* The second act is the Epitasis, or [complication](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#complication).
* The final act is the Catastrophe, or [resolution](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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. Read more about them in Chapter 17.

**Write to be Read**

One of the terms you'll hear a lot from me is "your [reader](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#literary-manager) or to the [associate artistic director](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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.

**Chapter 4**

**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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#character) 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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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.

**Chapter 5**

**What Does a Play Look Like?**

**Not Like This!**

You may have seen plays that look something like this:

ALEX. I want somewhere with a lawn.

MERC. What? That patch of dead grass on 133rd not good enough? *(Merc eyes*

*the lock on the box of women's clothing.)* Wish I had a lawn. I would've been

a different person. (Beat.) Make sure you get a lawn. (Beat.) You been through

your Mom's clothing?

ALEX. *(Lying)* No. You?

Notice that character name, dialogue and intermittent (stage directions) extend from left margin to right margin, except for a small indent of the first line. Text is single-spaced.

This is **Published Play Format**, typically what the publisher gives you in an [Acting Edition](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#acting-edition), and its goal is to save space. It's hard to read, and not submission format. Submitting a script in this format is a bad idea - it would surely give a theater's overworked literary staff a headache.

**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.

Note: Script formatting software has made formatting all scripts considerably easier and less time-intensive in recent years, and many of these same programs have playwriting templates, with settings that you can modify with relative ease. They're definitely worth investing in and more on those later.

**Chapter 6**

**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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#title-page)
* [Cast Page](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#cast-page)
* [Musical Numbers Page](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#musical-numbers-page) (musicals only)
* [Act/Scene Heading](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#act-scene-heading)
* [At Rise Description](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#at-rise-description)
* Character Name
* Dialogue
* Stage Directions
* [Transition](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#transition)

No particular [font](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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.

**Software Tip:** Script formatting software knows how to put off page numbering till the right place. As we go along other rules are either incorporated or quickly set up in the software, too.

**Chapter 7**

**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. Being something of a minimalist, my title page might look something like this...

BEEF JUNKIES

Jon Dorf

An alternate method of presentation:

COLLISIONS IN AIR AND SPACE

by Jon Dorf

For a musical:

DAY ONE

[Book](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#book) and lyrics by Jon Dorf

Music by Mary Nelson and James Balmer

Your address, phone number, email address follows. Print it right justified (in the right half of the page) and as close to the bottom margin as you can get without wrapping onto the next page (or your agent's contact information, if you have representation).

**The Rules:** Should you put the [draft](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#draft) number or the date on your script? I would argue "yes" to the draft number and "no" to the date. The draft number helps the theater tell one draft from another. For example, Tom Shade and Michael Gray, co-artistic directors of City Theater Company of Wilmington (DE), where I am the resident playwright, read new drafts of my plays on a regular basis. I would hate to have to tell Tom or Michael, "the latest draft is the one 92 pages long, not 94 pages." Printing a date on a script, while technically serving as distinguishing, has the negative impact of dating your work.

**The Rules:** Don't ever send out a First Draft!

What about a [Copyright Notice](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#copyright-notice)?

Copyright notices are placed either below the address field on the right, or left aligned on the first line of the address block.

There are two schools of thought on whether to put a copyright notice on the title page. One argument is that it may deter would-be thieves from "borrowing" your work and shows that you know your rights. The opposite argument is that it's a sign of paranoia or amateurism.

Your script is copyrighted from the instant you write it, even though to receive statutory protection it needs to be registered with the Register of Copyrights; therefore including the copyright notice is redundant.

Here's what *my* complete title page might look like:

LAST RIGHT BEFORE THE VOID

Jon Dorf

c/o The Writers Store

2040 Westwood Blvd.

Westwood, CA 90025

(800) 272-8927

jcdorf1@aol.com

DRAFT 2.3

**Chapter 8**

**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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#producer) or [director](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#suggested-setting) in California, Nevada,

Idaho and Montana.

**Chapter 9**

**'Musical' Numbers Page Element**

**The Rules:** In a musical, include the Musical Numbers Page after the Cast Page. The exact format varies, but think two columns: in the left column list the titles of the songs, and the right column, left indented approximately 3", list the performing characters. Divide the show into acts.

Below is the Musical Numbers Page for *Day One*, for which I wrote book and lyrics, a [commission](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#commission) from the Choate Rosemary Hall Summer Arts Conservatory, where I served as playwright-in-residence.

**LIST OF SONGS**

**Act I**

"Day One" The Cast

"A Hole in the Wall" Jake, Stanley, Wannabes

"This Place This Time" Stanley, Stella, Jake

"Mohammed Ali" Skeeter

"The Solution is Clear" Erika, Skeeter, Wannabes

"The Solution is Clear" (reprise) Erika, Skeeter, Blaise

"Fifteen Minutes" Thyme, Ensemble

"Melt Into Me" Helen

"A Good Boy is Hard to Find, and a Wannabes

Good Man is Downright Impossible"

"Out Past Infinity" Blaise

"Don't Let it Splatter" Helen, Jake, Stanley, Stella, Skeeter

**Act II**

"Locker Room Blues/Year-Long Limbo" Skeeter, The Cast

"New School Order" Erika, Wannabes

"Lost Sheep" Helen, Jake, Stanley, Stella

"I Hate Stanley" Stella

"Sand" Thyme, Jake

"Come on, Jake" Wannabes

"Sturdy and Strong" Blaise, Jake

"I Hate Stanley" (reprise) Helen, Wannabes

"In a Heartbeat" Stanley, Stella, Helen

"The Dance/Finale" The Cast

**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...

**Chapter 10**

**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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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 a

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

laundry in a washing machine. Her

pocketbook is atop Agatha Christie's

*Dead Man's Folly* inside her empty

laundry basket.)

**Chapter 11**

**The Stage**

Notice the use of the terms "[right](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#right)" and "center," which along with "[left](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#left)" are theatrical shorthand for [Stage Right](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#stage-right), [Stage Left](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#stage-left) and [Center Stage](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#upstage)" or "[downstage](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#downstage)," or their shorter forms, \*up and \*down. The latter terms get their names from the early days of theatre, when stages were [raked](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#rake), 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.

**Chapter 12**

**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**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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 ...

(She 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**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#off)**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**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#interrupt)

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**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#emphasized-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**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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** **BEN**

Only diamonds do it. Only diamonds do it.

**Writing Tip:** Make sure to punctuate *very* carefully. Through careful punctuation, and not by giving them [line readings](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#line-reading), 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.

**Chapter 13**

**Lyrics**

If you're writing a musical or a "play with music," if words are to be sung, they need to be set apart from spoken dialogue. Lyrics are written in ALL CAPS, but in all other respects, lyrics are written in dialogue format. Some writers double-space between stanzas (I do below), some don't. Go with whatever is the easiest read.

**ERIKA**

(speaking as if to a young child)

What do you think of your new school so far?

(beat)

Let's go - the bell rang five minutes ago, and you don't have a hall pass.

(Erika pulls Skeeter to his feet, but he breaks away.)

**SKEETER**

THE BELL HAS RUNG

MY BELL'S BEEN RUNG

THREE TIMES ALREADY THIS MORNING

OR WAS IT FOUR - I'M BARELY THROUGH THE DOOR

AND I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE

I DIDN'T ASK TO BE IN HONORS MATH

OR FOR THAT GIRL TO CHOP MY LUNCH IN HALF

AND LEAVE ME FOR DEAD

WITH THE FOOD CHAIN WRAPPED AROUND MY HEAD

If there is spoken dialogue in the middle of a song, just insert them on a separate line in mixed case between the lyrics, not separated by any blank lines:

**ERIKA**

It's a replica. I wanted to get used to it. You can't just swing this thing

anyway the wind blows.

A GAVEL IS AS PRECIOUS AS A RAIN IN THE SAHARA

YOU MUST SWING AND BANG WITH VIGOR AND LET NO ONE ELSE BE FAIRER

**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.

**Chapter 14**

**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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#lights-fade)" and "[Blackout](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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**

(Beat. Exiting)

Good war.

**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."

**Chapter 15**

**Page Break Rules**

**The Rules:**

* Do not break dialogue or [stage directions](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#stage-directions) in mid-sentence.
* Do not page break between a [character name](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#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.

**Binding**

**The Rules:** Three-hole punch your play using [brads](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#brads) in the top and bottom holes, leaving the middle hole empty.

Unless a theater has specific guidelines, [binding](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#binding) varies. I prefer to package my plays like screenplays.

Want a more secure script? Some writers like to three-hole punch [script covers](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#script-cover) to use as front and back covers. When a theater requires a "[securely bound](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#securely-bound-script)" script, I particularly favor a folder (it works with a standard three-hole punch) with a card backing and a see-through front. Whichever method you prefer, The Writers Store carries all of the supplies necessary to package your script appropriately for submission. For ten-minute plays, a secure staple in the upper-left corner is usually sufficient unless the theater tells you otherwise. Do *not* paperclip scripts unless directed to do so by the theater, ditto with loose scripts (the [US Register of Copyrights](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#register-of-copyrights) is the exception to the loose script rule).

**Chapter 16**

**Submitting Your Work**

**The Rules:** Understand that large cast shows are very expensive, often prohibitively so, for professional theaters to produce. Schools, on the other hand, often need large cast shows to involve lots of students. Shows with lots of female roles will be particularly welcome at the typical high school.

**The Rules:** Before submitting your script to a theater company, be aware of a few facts:

* All literary offices are inundated with scripts and understaffed.
* Different theaters want you to approach them - or not approach them - in different ways.
* Not every theater will be the right place to send your newly-minted masterpiece.
* If a theater wants a certain type of play (for example, they only produce one-acts), that's what they want. Don't send them anything else.
* Response times vary from a few weeks to more than a year. Be patient and move on to writing something else rather than sitting on your hands.
* Most scripts have to be rejected - often for reasons that have nothing to do with the quality of your play - because theaters receive many more scripts than they can produce. It's *not* personal.

Submissions to theaters follow one of the following five paths:

[**Direct Solicitation**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#direct-solicitation)

Don't call them. They'll call you.

[**Agent Submission**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#agent-submission)

You don't send it - your agent does. Don't have an agent? Some theaters that request Agent Submissions only may respond to a well-written query or to a writer with a professional recommendation, but there's no guarantee.

[**Professional Recommendation**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#professional-recommendation)

Have a theater professional - typically an [artistic director](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#artistic-director) or a literary manager or someone familiar to the company - draft a brief letter recommending the script. Send that with the script and your cover letter.

[**Query**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#query)

Send a one-page letter briefly telling them about the play, its history (productions, readings, workshops), any unusual technical requirements, and a little bit about your experience. You may be asked to submit a one page [synopsis](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#synopsis) and/or sample pages. When in doubt, submit a ten-page - no more - dialogue sample. Always include a stamped postcard for their reply so that they can just check, "Yes, please send a copy of *Milk and Cookies*," or "Yes, please send a copy of *Milk and Cookies* after (date)," or "Other." Don't give them a "no thank you" box to check; if their response is no, at least make them write it. Give them space next to the "Other" box to explain why. Sometimes they'll take the time to tell you. Why a stamped postcard and not an envelope? Since you want them to request the script, make it easy for them: with a postcard, all they have to do is check the box and drop it in the mail.

[**Unsolicited**](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#unsolicited-script)

Just send them the script with a brief cover letter (see Query). Some theaters that take unsolicited scripts don't want to be queried, others leave it as an option. Always include a stamped, self-addressed envelope (SASE) for the theater's reply. I enclose a letter-sized envelope and tell the theater to recycle the script if they pass on it, for three reasons: 1) chances are that the draft the theater has will no longer be current by the time they send it back, 2) who knows what condition it will be in - you can't exactly resubmit a stained, dog-eared script. And 3) it doesn't cost much to simply print or photocopy another copy.

If a theater accepts query letters and unsolicited scripts, the query letter is a good money-saver if you're not sure that a theater is really right for your work.

**The Rules:** *Never* send out the only copy of your script. And make back-ups of your computer files regularly.

How do you find out what theaters want? A good starting place is [The Dramatists Guild of America Resource Directory](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#dramatists-guild-of-america). The Dramatists Guild is the organization of professional playwrights, lyricists and composers. Any serious writer should join, because not only do members receive the Resource Directory and other publications, but they also get access to a treasure-trove of services for playwrights, ranging from free legal advice on playwriting matters to discounted theater tickets to help ironing out disputes with theaters.

**The Rules:** Proofread your script for typographical and other errors, and remember that a spell-check program doesn't catch everything. Another set of eyes or reading the script aloud really helps.

**Chapter 17**

**International Submission Formats**

While the Manuscript Format as described in this article is the rule in the United States, Australia and New Zealand, and most theaters anywhere in the world will accept it, there are other formats prevalent in other countries. Look below for some helpful hints:

**Canada, France, Great Britain**

* Page margins are approximately the same as in the United States, approximately 1.5" on the left, 1" on the right, and 1" on the top and the bottom.
* Capitalize the speaking character's name, (just like in the US), but place the name flush left, followed by a colon or semicolon. Putting the name in boldface is a popular option, which increases readability.
* A speaker's dialogue follows on the same line as the character name, left-indented approximately 1.5-2" or generously enough for there to be sufficient white space for easy readability.
* Stage directions should sit on their own line, italicized and left-indented approximately .5-1".
* Directions to the actors (for example, "excitedly") are placed within dialogue, contained in parentheses and italicized.
* A blank line follows all dialogue or stage direction.

**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.