

### **ACCOMPLISHING A DRAFT**

Stuart Spencer claims that, "A play is more wrought than written. A playwright constructs a play as a wheelwright once constructed a wheel: a general shape is laid out, and then hammered, bent, nailed, reshaped, hammered again and again. . ." Take the most promising idea you have for a ten-minute play and submit it to the wheelwright's test:

- What is its general shape? Does it express a character's journey from one condition or state to another?
- Does the set help to convey the characters and their situation? Does costume reveal? Do props further the action?
- Does the protagonist deeply desire something? Is the antagonist a match in power for the protagonist? Are they both consistent and complex?
- Is the dialogue sayable? Does it further the conflict? Does it reveal more than one thing at a time?
- Does the action unfold as a series of discoveries and decisions?

Hammer, bend, reshape, and hammer again.

## Drama Format

The formats for prose and poetry are relatively straightforward and easy to master. The format for plays, unfortunately, is not. It is nevertheless necessary either to learn or to achieve by software created especially for this purpose, because every peculiarity annoying to the writer is an aid to the actors, director, and designers who must interpret the script in living action. For instance, the names of characters (except when used as a form of address in dialogue), and the pronouns that refer to them, are always in capital letters and are centered before speeches because this visually helps actors spot what they say and do. Short stage directions are put in parentheses and long ones to the right of the page because that signals where the action is indicated. Pages are numbered not merely consecutively but also by act and scene because in rehearsal a director specifies "Take it from the top of scene two" rather than "Take it from page 38," which has less meaning in the structure of a play. And so forth.

The format thus designed for production is not necessarily the same one you will encounter in a printed "trade" or textbook edition of the play, where there's a higher priority on saving space than on convenience to the company. But as a playwright your goal is production and your allegiance to the theatrical troupe; your manuscript should reflect that.

Software that automatically produces a submission-ready play or screenplay is available, and is worth the investment for anyone who intends to pursue these fields. The software most often recommended by playwrights and screenwriters is Final Draft.

Playwrights often feel that they *do* need to copyright their work because it may be circulated to many people, and could be produced without their knowledge; it's difficult to prove production after the fact. If you intend to send your work out to production companies and feel more comfortable with a copyright, you should write for "Form PA" to: U.S. Copyright Office, Library of Congress, Washington, DC 20559.

Plays should have a cover page with title, some sort of designation such as "A play in two scenes" or "A comedy in one act," and the author's name and address. Plays should be typed in 12-point (or "pica") font, and should be (at least for submission—probably not for class) sent in a sturdy binder.

THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL  
A Play in Five Acts  
by  
Richard Brinsley Sheridan

Eng. 4701, Drama Workshop  
Prof. Joseph Surface  
Drury Lane University  
Feb. 28, 1777

*Cast of Characters*

Sir Peter Teazle  
Sir Oliver Surface  
Joseph Surface  
Charles Surface  
Crabtree  
Sir Benjamin Backbite  
Rowley  
Trip  
Moses  
Snake  
Careless (and other Companions to Charles  
Surface)  
Servants, etc.  
Lady Teazle  
Maria  
Lady Sneerwell  
Mrs. Candor

SCENE

*London*

TIME

*The present.*

Act I

Scene 1

LADY SNEERWELL's house.  
LADY SNEERWELL at the  
dressing table, SNAKE drinking  
chocolate.

LADY SNEERWELL

The paragraphs, you say, Mr. Snake, were all  
inserted?

SNAKE

They were, madam, and as I copied them myself in  
a feigned hand, there can be no suspicion whence  
they came.

LADY SNEERWELL

Did you circulate the reports of Lady Brittle's  
intrigue with Captain Boatstall?

SNAKE

(HE kisses his handkerchief.) That is in as fine  
a train as your ladyship could wish—in the common

SNAKE (Continued)

course of things, I think it must reach Mrs. Clakit's ears within four-and-twenty hours; and then, you know, the business is as good as done.

LADY SNEERWELL

Why, truly, Mrs. Clakit has a very pretty talent, and a great deal of industry.

SNAKE

True, madam, and has been tolerably successful in her day. To my knowledge, she has been the cause of six matches being broken off, and three sons being disinherited, of four forced elopements, as many close confinements, nine separate maintenances, and two divorces. Nay, I have more than once traced her causing a *tête-a-tête* in the *Town and Country Magazine*, when the parties had perhaps never seen each other's faces before in the course of their lives.

LADY SNEERWELL

She certainly has her talents, but her manner is gross.

(SHE dons her wig. SNAKE, taken aback, spills chocolate on his waistcoat. HE wipes at it with the handkerchief.)

SNAKE

'Tis very true. She generally designs well, has a free tongue, and a bold invention; but

## *Theatrical Dialogue*

Unlike the other genres, all the dialogue in drama is direct. There is no place for indirect or summary dialogue. With the single exception of “ad lib”—which means that the actors fill in at their discretion with, for instance, greetings to each other or background mumble—you write the words any character speaks. You may not, for example, say in a stage direction, “*Joe calls in from the bathroom, still complaining.*” It’s the playwright’s obligation to produce the words.

The most difficult dialogue to write is often the exposition, in which you must give the audience the necessary information about what has gone on before curtain rise, and what the situation is now. A useful tradition, and probably the most frequently used device, is to have a character who knows explain to a character who doesn’t know. But if you don’t have a character who is handily ignorant, you can have two characters talk about the situation and make it sound natural as long as they concentrate on how they feel about it, or disagree about it, so that the information comes out incidentally, sideways. If a character says, “My sister’s train is due at four o’clock into Union Station,” we get the facts, but if he says, “I can’t talk now! I’ve got to make it to Union Station by four—my sister goes bananas if I’m not there to meet her train,” we know something about his attitude and the relationship as well as the situation—and it sounds like talk.

A third expository device, if your play is stylized, is to have a character come forward and speak directly to the audience. Ever since film began to prove itself the best medium for realism, this **theatricalist** technique (acknowledging that the play is a play and the audience an audience) has become more and more popular in the theater.

Good dialogue will carry most of its tone as an integral part of the lines, and when this is the case, there is no need to announce the tone of voice in a stage direction—and it can in fact be insulting to the actors. An example:

**SHE** (*slyly*): By the way, did you get the rent money from the Smiths?

**HE** (*suspiciously*): What makes you ask that?

**SHE** (*casually*): Oh, nothing, I just wondered.

**HE** (*angrily*): You’ve had all the money you’re going to get this week!

Not a single one of these tonal directions is necessary; the tone is inherent in the lines. Contrast with this version:

**SHE:** By the way, did you get the rent money from the Smiths?

**HE:** What makes you ask that?

**SHE** (*slipping the catalogue behind the cushion*): Oh, nothing, I just wondered.

**HE** (*laughing*): You've had all the money you're going to get this week!  
(*He begins to tickle her.*)

Here, actions and tone reveal a contradiction or qualification of what the words suggest, so the stage directions are appropriate.

Here are a few further things to remember about play dialogue, to make it natural and intense:

- The sooner you introduce the conflict, the better. A certain amount of exposition will be necessary, but if you can reveal *at the same time* the point of attack, it's all to the good. *Hamlet* begins with two guards discussing the fact that the ghost has walked (the inciting incident). But they immediately anticipate the conflict: *Will it walk again?*
- Dialogue is action when it contains both conflict and the possibility of change. Keep alert to the possibility that characters discover and decide through the medium of talk. Debate between two firmly decided people is not dramatic, no matter how mad they are. Disagreement between people who must stay in proximity to each other, especially if they care about each other, is inherently more dramatic than if they can walk away.
- Use "no" dialogue, in which people deny, contradict, refuse, qualify, or otherwise say no to each other.
- Dialogue has to be said, so say it aloud and make sure it flows easily, allows for breath, sounds like talk.
- Remember that people are not always able or willing to say just what they mean, and that this breaks the flow of the talk. This is especially true when emotions are heating up. People break off, interrupt themselves and each other. Use sentence fragments. Don't always finish their . . .
- Silence can be white hot. The most intense emotions are the ones you can't express in words. When a character spews out an eloquent paragraph of anger, he is probably not as angry as if he stands, breathes hard, and turns away.
- Vary short exchanges with longer ones. A change of pace, from a sharp series of short lines to a longer speech and back again, keeps the rhythm interesting.
- Nearly everybody tries to be funny now and again. You can often reveal character, and also what a character may be hiding, by having her try to make light of it. A joke that falls flat with other characters is a great tension-raiser. Conversely, beware of having the characters too amused by each other's wit; the funnier they find the jokes, the less likely the audience is to be amused.



- Similarly, avoid having the characters comment on each other's dialogue; it's self-conscious. If He says, "That's a clever way to put it!" we'll hear the author in the praise.

### TRY THIS 10.5

Choose one of the characters you have written about in your journal. Write a monologue in that character's voice beginning with one of the following trigger lines:

I knew right away I'd said the wrong thing.

What is it this time?

I didn't hear the doorbell.

What took you so long?

You think you know me.

It started out fine.

Now introduce stage directions into the monologue, describing anything we can see—what the character is wearing, doing, and so forth—so as to change, contradict, or qualify the meaning of the speech.

### *Revealing Thought*

There are also several deliberate theatrical traditions for revealing thought. In the **soliloquy** the character simply talks to himself (*To be or not to be . . .*), and the audience accepts that these words take place in the mind. In an **aside**, the character says one line to another character and another to the audience or to thin air. Traditionally, the aside is always the truth of that character's feeling. In a **voiceover**, the thoughts are recorded and play over the live scene. All of these techniques are stylized and can tend to be self-conscious. Use *very sparingly*—especially if your basic mode is realistic.

Crucial events of the past can be difficult to introduce naturally. One useful technique for doing this is the **emotional recall**, in which one character tells another about an incident from the past. But a narrated event is no more inherently dramatic than a debate, and you must not rely on the narration to hold the audience's interest. In order to keep the drama in the here! and now! the narration must hold the potential for change. The important emotion in an emotional recall is not the emotion of the teller but of the listener. Typically, a charged situation exists between one character and one or more others (it can be her mother or a mob). The first character tells a story. The listener(s) change attitude entirely. The dramatic situation is not the one in the story; it is the one on stage, where we see the change.