

Chapter 1

Introducing the Art and Craft of Playwriting

In This Chapter

- ▶ Looking at what playwriting is all about
 - ▶ Getting your bearings as a playwright and getting to work
 - ▶ Bringing your play to the stage
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Playwriting is fun. Writing words that become the basis for what actors do and say in the presence of an audience is a heady experience. And fortunately, the enjoyment and satisfaction of writing plays is not reserved for some small, elite cluster of linguistic masterminds.

Anyone can write plays. It doesn't require formal training. But like any other pursuit in life, the more you know about a subject, the quicker you'll catch on and the better you'll be at it. This book is here to help. It provides you, in a straightforward and uncomplicated manner, with the practical knowledge and tools you need to get down to the joy of writing plays, sooner rather than later.

This chapter lets you get your toes wet in the world of playwriting so you can see how you like the water. It also offers you an overview of how this book will help you write and appreciate plays.

Understanding the Nature of the Beast

A playwright has a foot in each of two worlds: the world of art and the world of craft. For playwrights, the dividing line between art and craft is clear. The playwright as an *artist* conceives of an idea, a story, a statement to be made by the play. And the playwright as *craftsman* brings together the materials and construction skills to build the platform — the play — from which the idea, story, and statement can effectively reach out to audiences.

In a less metaphorical and more practical vein, a playwright writes plays for theatre. As obvious as that fact is, it's important to understand that plays and theatre, though inextricably interconnected, are distinct and therefore deserve individual consideration.

✔ **The play:** A *play* is a story written in the form of a script containing dialogue (what the characters say) and stage directions (what the characters do physically). A play is intended to be performed by actors in the presence of an audience.

✔ **Theatre:** *Theatre* is a branch of the performing arts that involves the presentation of a play by performers before a live audience. (Of course, *theatre* can also refer to the physical structure that the play is performed in.) Unlike the production of a film, theatre doesn't require expensive electronic gear, such as cameras, lights, microphones, sound equipment, and so on. In its most basic form, theatre doesn't require a director, and it doesn't even need the presence of a playwright after the script has been completed. You don't need to be an Einstein to grasp theatre's fundamental formula:

Script + Performer + Audience = Theatre

Glimpsing the Life of a Playwright

The life of a playwright is, in many respects, much like the life of any other artist — it has its ups and downs. Working as a playwright, you'll have moments of artistic pleasure and satisfaction, and you'll also have periods of frustration and disappointment. The work requires persistent hard work, and it rewards you with a sense of fulfillment from a completed project. You'll find that personal sacrifices have to be made, but you'll get supreme gratification from knowing that your work has made the world richer.

Working as a playwright is exciting and challenging and fascinating. After you've taken the plunge, there's no going back. I've heard playwrights at low points grumbling about giving it up and leading a normal life, but I've never seen one do it. When theatre gets in your blood, you'll likely find that you don't want to be doing anything else.



The following tips for becoming a successful playwright apply to your day-to-day existence as well as your overall lifestyle. You'll find some of these practices invigorating and others more mundane, but they're all important.

✔ **Be an attentive observer of people and student of human nature.** If you want to create and stage believable characters in a play, you need to watch, listen to, and learn from everyone you come across, and you should be able to make use of what you take in.

- ✔ **See and read lots of plays.** You can learn a good deal from the successes and failures of others, and you need to know and understand trends and what producers and audiences are looking for.
- ✔ **Participate fully in life.** By interacting with others and staying active — from tweeting to traveling — you keep the mental shelves well stocked with fresh experiences to draw on.
- ✔ **Have a quiet and interruption-free place to work.** It can be a bedroom converted to an office or cubicle at your library, whatever works for you.
- ✔ **Have the self-discipline to sit yourself down to write, preferably at the same time each day.** Some habits are beneficial, and this is one of them. You become a better and productive writer by actually writing.
- ✔ **Make a living.** The vast majority of artists in any artistic medium need to have a day job. Man (or woman) does not live by art alone (most of us don't, anyway).

The following sections pull together all these practices — and then some — to give you an idea of what playwriting is all about and the process you work through to create a play that's ready for the stage. Chapter 2 also provides more detail on how to develop as a playwright.

Understanding stage plays

Plays are magic. For a couple of hours, a collection of strangers assembles and sits in the dark to witness other strangers enacting a story. The first group of strangers — the audience — is, without conscious effort or consent, drawn psychologically and emotionally into the story. The audience begins to care what becomes of characters who are played by the actors onstage. As if by hypnotism, audience members lose track of time and forget themselves and their personal concerns for the duration of the play.

Plays have a language that's common to playwrights, actors, directors, and other theatre people. This language includes terminology like *protagonist* (the main character), *antagonist* (the primary obstacle facing the protagonist), *conflict* (opposing objectives), *spine* (story line), *inciting incident* (the event that gets the plot going), *backstory* (events that occurred before the play begins), *exposition* (the gradual revealing of the backstory through dialogue), *climax* (the final confrontation between the protagonist and antagonist), and more. Use of this specialized vocabulary promotes clarity among theatre people as a play is developed and, ultimately, staged.



Compelling plays — plays that keep theatregoers glued to their seats — feature the following important characteristics:

- ✓ **Characters that the audience can understand and empathize with.**
- ✓ **Stories that keep audiences guessing; they never become predictable.** You never want an audience to get ahead of the story.
- ✓ **Specific details about the characters and the story rather than generalities and stereotypes.**
- ✓ **An essential simplicity and clarity at the core.** No matter how complex the characters and story may be, the play should build to the answer of one simple and unambiguous question: Will the protagonist succeed in achieving her objectives or not?

Coming up with and refining ideas

Inspiration is unpredictable. You'll never be able to tell exactly when you'll come upon the play idea you want to spend months and even years exploring. Ideas for a play can come from so many sources that listing and discussing the many possibilities would take a book in itself. However, the following list suggests a number of likely sources for good ideas:

- ✓ **Your life:** Good or bad occurrences in your life usually provide fertile material. A writer's life is her unique and most valuable resource.
- ✓ **Events you've witnessed:** Something you've seen, even if it didn't involve you personally, can inspire a good story for the stage.
- ✓ **Stories you've been told:** Family memories or other stories and events that have been told to you can spark a play idea.
- ✓ **Media reports:** Events, enraging or encouraging, that have been reported in newspapers, magazine, television, radio, and on the Internet can provide the germ of an idea that can grow into a play.
- ✓ **Your dreams:** Some of the most intriguing, if sometimes bizarre, ideas for plays can come out of your unconscious mind while dreaming.
- ✓ **Your imagination:** Sometimes ideas just pop into your head seemingly with no provocation at all. Write them down.



Carry a notebook or an electronic device that allows you to key in information. You never know when that great idea will creep up on you, and you don't want to trust it to your memory.

To read more about finding and developing ideas for plays, turn to Chapter 4.

Creating complete characters

Plays are about what their characters do and say. The key to creating complete, lifelike, and believable characters is specifics. The more detailed and fully fleshed out your characters are, the more readily audiences will empathize and sympathize with them.



A mantra you can embrace that will facilitate the creation of successful characters is this: Know your characters as well as you know your best friend. All the information you know about your best friend allows you to predict with great accuracy what he or she will do in a given situation. And that's where you want to be with your characters, even if most of the characters' details and specifics are never mentioned in your play.

Invest some time before you start writing your play in writing mini-biographies of your characters. Chapter 7 gives you plenty of ideas about what sort of info to include in these bios. When you're working with an intimate knowledge of your characters, it'll feel like your play is almost writing itself.

Factoring in the logistics of staging plays

One of the hardest things for the generations that grew up with movies and television as their primary source of storytelling entertainment is to internalize the essential differences between screenplays/teleplays and plays for the stage. They are as different as, well, apples and oranges.

Screenplays and teleplays have the technical ability (and usually the budget) to take audiences anywhere anytime. A story told through TV or film can be in New York one moment, in Hawaii the next, and at the top of Mt. Everest the scene after. Film and TV crews can travel to these locations to film and skillfully edit these very different locations into a seamless story line. In addition, today, much of what you see on a screen is created or supported by images produced with computers.

Stageplays, on the other hand, are limited to what can be done on a stage with real people in real time. Plays, of necessity, focus on the interaction of the characters and on their emotional lives. Theatre springs from characters trying to achieve their goals in opposition to the goals of other characters. That's what plays do well. What plays don't do well are car chases, explosions, alien abductions, gunfights, and other large, physically demanding activities; they can be simulated on stage, but they are more realistically done on film or TV.

Getting started on your play

As you get started on your play, you want to have your ducks in a row. Consider all the following recommendations:

- ✔ **Be sure your characters are detailed and specific and driven by clear objectives.** You want to be clear on which character is your protagonist and which is your antagonist and what each of them is after.
- ✔ **Be sure your cast is as lean as it can be.** It's an unfortunate reality in professional theatre today that the smaller the cast, the more attractive the play to producers. So you want to be sure that you axe those superfluous characters that appear for a line or two, never to be seen again. Playwriting today requires not only artistic imagination and vision but an inventiveness to do more with fewer actors.
- ✔ **Remember to use your environment in the play.** Where your play is set should not be arbitrary or ambiguous. A scene involving two brothers in conflict over an inheritance will play out very differently if it takes place in their home, in a restaurant, in a church, or in the room of their dying father. Where the dispute takes place can and should influence what they can say and how they can say it.
- ✔ **Be clear about your *inciting incident*.** This important term indicates the event that ignites the play and sets your protagonist on her journey. (Turn to Chapter 10 find out more about inciting incidents.)
- ✔ **Start your play as far into the story as possible.** Writing plays is about picking the crucial moments of your story and putting only those on stage. Early events and background information can be relegated to backstory and revealed through exposition. (Chapter 10 also discusses these components of the beginning of your play.)
- ✔ **Consider adding a ticking clock.** Suspense can be fueled by a limit on the time your protagonist has to complete her mission. (No, it doesn't have to be a literal ticking clock. And yes, you can read more about this subject — in Chapter 10.)
- ✔ **If you can at this point, have a vision of your climactic moment.** Knowing what the final confrontation between the protagonist and antagonist will look like helps guide you through writing the middle of the play.

Some writers outline their plays before beginning work. Some writers outline some of the time. Others prefer to plunge right in and see where the play takes them. You'll figure out in time what practice works best for you, but when you're beginning, my best advice is to outline. The time you invest in thinking through your play makes the writing easier and faster and helps you avoid the dreaded writer's block.

Developing your story line

The middle portion of a play is often the part that requires the bulk of the work. In the middle of the play, your protagonist encounters the obstacles to the completion of her mission.

One by one, the obstacles need to be overcome before the protagonist can move ahead. The obstacles should increase in difficulty, giving a sense of rising action. And to develop the audience's emotional involvement, you need to include setbacks, moments when both the audience and the character feel pessimistic about the prospects. The protagonist's journey toward the climactic moment should be anything but smooth sailing.

A tool for coming up with formidable obstacles for your protagonist is to ask yourself this question: What's the worst thing that could happen right now? And then make it happen. Chapter 11 further advises you on how to develop the middle section of your play with obstacles.



If you're writing the now standard two-act full-length play, you want to craft an ending to the first act that will have your audiences itching to come back to see how things turn out. It should involve a point of no return; the protagonist should be so far into her journey that there's no going back. If you create a cliffhanger (also sometimes referred to as a *hook*) at the end of the first act, the audience goes to intermission thinking, "How's she going to get herself out of that? I can't wait to get back to see what happens."

Building to the climax and resolution

The *climax* is the point near the end of your play when the protagonist and antagonist confront each other one last time. It's the apex of your protagonist's uphill climb. As a result of the climactic moment, only one of the two combatants can emerge on top.

In plays where the protagonist ultimately succeeds in her quest, the climactic moment — her victory — is often preceded by a low point, a negative condition from which it looks like the protagonist cannot recover. Then, like the mythical phoenix, the protagonist heroically arises from the ashes to achieve her objective.

In a play in which the protagonist is destined to fail to achieve her goal, the climactic moment often is preceded by a triumph or advance toward her objective. This temporary success sets the audience up to experience the irony and bittersweetness of the heroic defeat.

Plays have a cause-and-effect structure. One event, choice, decision, or action leads directly to another event, choice, decision, or action, and so on. This causality linking the events of your play should lead to the *earned conclusion*, an ending that's justified by the events that came before. It's a relevant and plausible conclusion that, in retrospect, seems inevitable to the story being played out. Chapter 12 guides you through the process of writing a good buildup to the climax and creating a powerful scene that determines the ending.

After the climax has occurred in your play, the characters generally have to deal with the consequences, the aftermath. Usually a brief moment or one last scene after the quest is over lets audience see how the dust settles. Audiences are given a peek at the new landscape. This closing is referred to as the play's *resolution*. The resolution is where you tie up loose ends if some of the threads in the play remain dangling. If your play has subplots, the resolution is your last opportunity to bring closure to the stories within your main story. Flip to Chapter 13 to find out more about resolutions.

It Ain't Over 'Til It's On Its Feet

Despite all your hard work, playwriting is not done when you finish a draft of your play you're happy with. Plays are meant to be produced — performed by actors for a live audience. Without performance, a play is like a custom-built car that's never taken out of the garage — it may look good, but it hardly serves any good purpose. So until a play is “on its feet,” the playwriting process is not completed. (There's a quaint form of literature called *closet drama*, which is plays that aren't meant to be performed but instead be read as one reads a book. Fine and dandy, but where's the fun in that?)

The whole point of writing a play is to tell a story to an audience through the medium of theatre, via actors in live stage performance. So until your play gets there, until it's on its feet in rehearsal and performance, the goal is not yet fully attained. You want to see your words dramatically spoken by actors. You want to see your story enacted from start to finish. And you crave the applause that's earned by a job well done — not only by you but by a host of talented and enthusiastic collaborators.

Getting ready to collaborate

Novels, short stories, and poems are forms of writing in which nothing necessarily stands between the creator and the audience. A poet can recite his work for anyone who'll listen. A prose writer can make her work available to readers online, if not through a publisher. However, unlike those forms of writing, playwriting does not stand on its own.

The play is where theatre begins. When you type the words “The End,” the play’s journey is only partially completed. For the play to come to full fruition, it needs to be performed by actors. And the performance is enhanced immensely by the work of a director and a score of people working on the set, lights, sound, costumes, props, and so on. In other words, without the participation of a team of theatre professionals, your play doesn’t happen.



The collaborative nature of playwriting requires the playwright to be open to the input and imagination of the other players. The director’s vision impacts your play. The creativity of all the designers (sets, lights, sound, and costumes) is evident in the finished production. You can’t have it all your way, and you shouldn’t want to. Just as a child is not only the product of parental authority but also of teachers, classmates, and media influences, so too is the production of a play the result of many hands. And as a playwright, you’ll want to adopt a team-spirit mindset to playwriting. (If you want to know more about that aspect of playwriting, Chapters 3 and 16 help you come to grips with the collaborative process.)

Promoting your play and understanding the business of theatre

When your play is ready to leave the nest, you need to prepare yourself for the realities of promoting your play with the intention of seeing it performed, which means getting the play produced.

Like it or not, a reality in theatre is that nothing gets done without money. And sad to say, it’s not always the best plays that get produced; sometimes a production decision is about the prospect, from a producer’s point of view, of selling lots of tickets. To get financing for your play, you must attract the attention of a producer or producing organization.

Before doing anything else, your first step is to copyright your play. It’s simple and relatively inexpensive and gives you the peace of mind that comes with having proof of ownership. After that, your path to production will likely include some, if not all, of these phases:

- ✓ Critique and feedback from people who know plays and theatre
- ✓ Script-in-hand readings of your play by actors before a public or specially invited audience to get a real-world sense of how well the play works
- ✓ Submission of the play to contests and competitions in the hopes of getting exposure for the play and building your résumé



Looking at “theatre” up close

Theatre can be a puzzling word: Is it an art form or a physical location? Is it spelled *-re* or *-er*?

In addition to indicating the art form, the word “theatre” designates the playhouse — the building, auditorium, or other space in which plays and other performing arts take place. The word comes from the Greek *theatron*, meaning *viewing/seeing place*. And that’s exactly what a theatre is — a place to see a performance.

To complicate matters, *theatre* can also be spelled *theater*. Some people make the distinction that *theatre* is the art form and *theater* is the building. Other people say that *-re* is the British spelling and *-er* is American. What is correct? Well, it boils down to a “you say tom-*a*-to and I say tom-*ah*-to” situation: The answer depends on whom you ask. To keep things simple, I use only the *-re* form — *theatre* — in this book.

- ✔ Networking by showing up at plays and other theatre functions — seminars, workshops, conferences, and so on, where theatre-savvy people are likely to congregate — to introduce yourself and make your interests known
- ✔ Query letters inviting producers and the artistic directors of theatre companies that produce a season of plays to read your play



Some playwrights fancy themselves *artistes* and see themselves as above the commonplace undertaking of promoting and marketing their plays. If you’re one of those, I have three words for you: Get over it. The successful playwright — the successful artist of any sort — is one who understands that you need to be your own best advocate. No one can speak to the merits of your work better than you.

When you’re ready to take on the challenge of getting your play produced, plenty of info in this book will help you on your way. Chapter 15 discusses the process of holding readings and revising your script, and Chapter 17 helps you nail down a producer so your vision can finally be brought to life on a stage.