

EDUCATION ACTIVITIES

PLAYWRITING:
GETTING STARTED

STATE THEATRE
COMPANY SOUTH AUSTRALIA



GETTING STARTED

There are a lot of different things to consider while writing a play and getting those first words down on the paper can feel confronting - especially when you don't have a clear idea in mind yet!

The following questions are a good starting point and will be helpful to consider before you start writing.

WHAT?

What will your play be about?

WHEN & WHERE?

When and where does the play take place? Are time and setting important to the play? Why/Why not?

WHY?

Why are you writing this play? Why are you compelled to share this story? What is your aim in telling this story?

WHO?

Who is your audience?

Coming up with an answer to each of these questions can be useful as you begin the writing process. State Educate have come up with some resources, questions and activities to help you unpack your ideas and form a solid foundation for your play.

WHAT IS YOUR PLAY ABOUT?

Some people go into the writing process with a very clear idea in mind; others need to do a bit of brainstorming before writing.

Whether you have an idea in mind or not, the following activities will help get you into a creative mindset – they might give you a new perspective on a concept you already have, or they may help you come up with that initial idea.

ACTIVITIES

Start with a ‘brain dump’.

Set a timer for 5 minutes and write down any ideas that come into your head – no matter how silly they might be! Any idea that jumps into your head is good enough to be recorded. Once the time is up, go through your ideas and see if any of them stand out. Can you make connections between any of them?

The brain dump might not generate the idea you end up going with for your play, but it is an excellent exercise to get your creativity flowing and start thinking outside the box.

Still stuck?

The following activities might help to spark a more solid idea:

- **Look at old photographs.** Go through your family photo album or yearbook. Think about the stories that exist behind the photos – if you don’t know the stories, imagine what they might be.
- **Read news articles.** Pay attention to the ‘normal’ stories as well as the strange ones. What else might be going on in the life of the person pictured? Make sure you read headlines closely, too. Note down any interesting stories, words or people/characters.
- **Pay attention to the people in your life.** Make sure you listen closely to your friends and family. Ask them questions about their backgrounds. Write down any funny comments or jokes you are told or overhear. All of these things can trigger an idea – although it’s always best to check with the person if they’re comfortable with you using their life as inspiration for your work.
- **Think about your own life experiences.** Has something funny, exciting or interesting happened in your own life? Could you use one of these experiences as a starting point or the climax/main action of your play? How might you change and adapt this event to make it work better for the stage?

Once you have your main idea or theme, write it down! You can write this in just a few words or a longer description. Prepare to unpack this idea further as you think about our when, where, why and who questions.



WHEN & WHERE DOES YOUR STORY TAKE PLACE?

The setting of your play can have a huge influence on the action or story. For example, a story about a man losing his job in Whyalla in the 1950s is a very different story than one about him losing his job in Sydney in 2020.

For this reason, some playwrights are very specific about the time and place their play is set in, while others like to leave these decisions up to the director.

QUESTIONS

Think about the main idea or theme of your play. Does it need to happen in a particular time or place?

Does it make more sense if it takes place in a particular town/city or year (e.g. Adelaide in 2016)? Or can you be more vague (e.g. an Australian capital city in the 2010s)? Or even vaguer (e.g. a democratic country some time within the last 10 years)?

When thinking about the setting, make sure you feel like you know enough about the sort of language used in that time and place.

If you are not choosing a particular time or place for your play to be set in, you will also need to consider the kind of language used within the play, avoiding slang or references to technology that might anchor it to a particular decade or place.

Photo: A scene from State Theatre Company South Australia's 2019 production of *End of the Rainbow*, which is set in London in 1969. Photographer: Chris Herzfield.

ACTIVITY

You've made a decision about the setting. Now test it out. Once you think you know the ideal setting for your play, try a few others and see how they might work. (This activity might also be useful if you're not feeling sure of your chosen setting!)

- Gather in a small group of at least three people. Each of you should gather four pieces of paper. Write down two different locations on two of the pieces of paper; write down two different dates/times on the other two pieces of paper. Be as vague or specific as you like. Fold the pieces of paper over.
- Put the pieces of paper with the locations in one bucket/bowl and the pieces of paper with the date/time in another bucket/bowl.
- Each of you should start by selecting one date and one location from the bowls.
- Imagine how your play might work (or not work!) in that setting. What changes would you have to make to tell the story in this setting? What would work better? What would be harder? You may choose to note down these ideas yourself or discuss them in your small group.
- Select another date and location from the bowls.
- Imagine your play with this new setting. Ask the same questions as above. Does this work better or worse than those you first selected? Again, you may choose to note down these ideas yourself or discuss them in your small group.

After this activity, you may want to change the setting of your play – or it might have reinforced that your original decision was best! Either way, write down your thoughts on the setting of the play on the same piece of paper where you wrote your main idea/theme.



WHY ARE YOU WRITING THIS PLAY?

This is probably the most difficult question to answer, but is an important one. Why do you want to share this story? What is the main purpose of the play?

There are many reasons writers write:

- to teach people about a particular issue
- to share an opinion
- to make people think about something differently
- to explore a complex world event or issue
- to entertain
- to make people laugh

Some plays might have one of these ideas or purposes in mind, while others might have been trying to do several of these things.

Think about the main concept, idea or theme behind your play. Why did you decide to focus your story on this? Why is it important to you?

QUESTIONS

Write down your responses to the questions below.

- What is your main aim in writing this story?
- How will you communicate this with your audience?
- How might this effect the way you tell the story?

Come back to these questions and responses if you get stuck during the writing process. They may help you focus on what you need to achieve or you may realise the story you're telling no longer fits this purpose and that you need to answer these questions in a new way.

ACTIVITY

Find a program from a play or show you previously attended, or see old show programs online under the Playwriting Resources section at statetheatrecompany.com.au/state-educate-resources.

Locate the Writer's Note towards the beginning of the program. Write down what you think the main purpose of the play is based on the Writer's Note - why do you think they decided to write this play?

Now write your own Writer's Note to explain the main purpose of your own show, as you currently understand it. Refer back to this during the writing process, making changes as appropriate.

WHO IS YOUR AUDIENCE?

Now you know why you are telling this story, it may be easier to figure out who you are telling it to? Who do you want to educate, entertain or communicate a message to?

Theatre audiences often encompass diverse groups of community members – people of very different ages, various economic and social backgrounds, and differing levels of experience in seeing plays. Because of this, most plays written for adults need to have broad appeal.

However, some pieces of theatre are created for very specific audiences. Theatre written for children is obviously going to look quite different to that created with an adult audience in mind.

ACTIVITY

Choose a movie, novel or play in a small group or as a class, making sure it is something everyone has seen or read.

Is it aimed at a particular age group? How do you know? Think about the main idea/theme behind the play, the language used, the ages of the characters, the setting, etc. How do these things indicate who the story is for?

Consider these same questions as they relate to other social and economic factors, such as class, race, gender and/or education.

What would people outside of these demographics think of the story? Can it still engage those audiences?

Discuss these questions and consider different viewpoints on who this is for. You may wish to choose a second movie, novel or play to compare responses.



QUESTIONS

Do you think your play will resonate most with a particular age group? Are you writing your story with a particular audience in mind (age, class, race, gender, education, etc.)?

If you are trying to communicate with or entertain people within a certain demographic, how will this show in your play? How will this have an impact on the type of language used and the characters you create?

How will people outside of your chosen demographic respond to the play? Will you still be able to communicate the central purpose of your play with these audiences?

FINAL NOTES ON AUDIENCE

If you are writing a play for adults, remember to make sure your play will communicate with and connect to a broad, diverse audience. You may still have an ideal audience in mind, or a group you feel the play will resonate with most strongly, but you want to make sure others outside of that group can also get something out of the experience.

If you are writing for children or young people, think about how you can write in a way that will appeal to that age group. You may want to narrow the ages down further – e.g. ages 3-7, 11-14, etc.

WHAT'S NEXT?

With these questions answered, you're ready to take your next steps. Consider doing one (or all!) of the following before you start writing:

- Jot down a brief description, or synopsis, of what you want to write.
- Write some dialogue or scenes which you can keep expanding.
- Read or research around the idea or story.
- Try and decide what characters you will focus on.
- Envisage the structure of the story you want to tell – this might come about by simply beginning to write and seeing where this leads you.

Set pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard, and begin. If you get stuck, refer to your notes on what, when, where, why and who.

More resources, including writing tips and advice related to characterisation and dialogue, are available under Playwriting Resources at:
statetheatrecompany.com.au/state-educate-resources

Remember to enter your play in the Flinders University Young Playwrights' Award. More information available at:
statetheatrecompany.com.au/flinders-young-playwright-award

RESOURCE CREATED IN 2020

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