

Beginner's Guide to Playwriting

Playwriting can have many benefits for middle- and high-school students. It can help you practice valuable writing skills, and it can be a fun way to express yourself. However, plays may be more unfamiliar for you than novels, short stories, or essays, and it can be difficult to know how to get started when faced with the task of writing your first-ever play. But fear not! By the end of this step-by-step guide, you will be equipped with a detailed outline that will have you ready to pen the next Broadway hit!

1. Plot: Do You Want to Write a Comedy or a Tragedy?



There are two main genres of plays: tragedies and comedies.

A **tragedy** is when the main character's luck turns from good to bad over the course of a story. For example, in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the couple's luck starts out good (they are in love and happy together) and turns to bad (they both die). Often, tragedies happen because a character makes a mistake, such as being too proud or trusting the wrong person. Tragedies can help teach readers a lesson about how to be better people. For example, *Romeo and Juliet* teaches the audience that one should not let old grudges or rivalries guide one's choices. Other famous tragedies include Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, August Wilson's *Fences*, and Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*.

A **comedy** is when the main character's luck turns from bad to good. For example, in the musical *Annie*, Annie starts out as a poor, lonely orphan and ends up with a happy, loving family. Comedies are more light-hearted than tragedies and often include elements of humor and wit. Other examples of comedies include Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Michael Frayn's *Noises Off*, and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Some plays combine elements of tragedy and comedy. These plays include genres like romance, tragicomedy, and melodrama. For your first play, it will be easier to write one or the other, but once you have gained experience writing plays, you can try your hand at one of these styles.

Which plot genre are you going to write? Circle your choice:

Comedy **Tragedy**

2. Characters



Your play can have many characters or only a few, but every play has one main character, called the “protagonist.” The **protagonist** is the character without whom the events of the play would not take place. Think about your protagonist. What is their name? What do they like to do? And most importantly, what do they want? What are their motivations for wanting those things? What drives them to say the things they say and do the things they do? Write a few sentences about your characters here:

3. Setting



Where does the story take place? What time of day? What country? What is the weather like? Is there anything else notable worth mentioning? Write a few sentences about the setting of your play here:

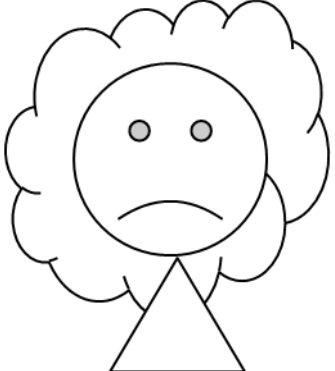
4. Story



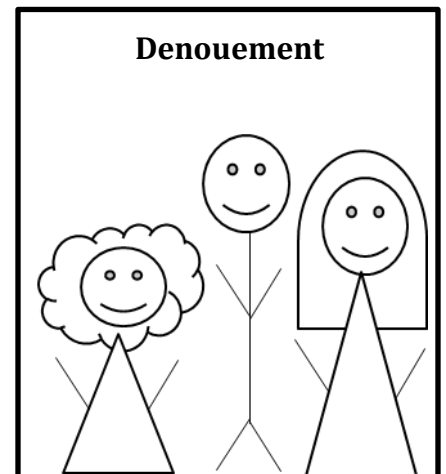
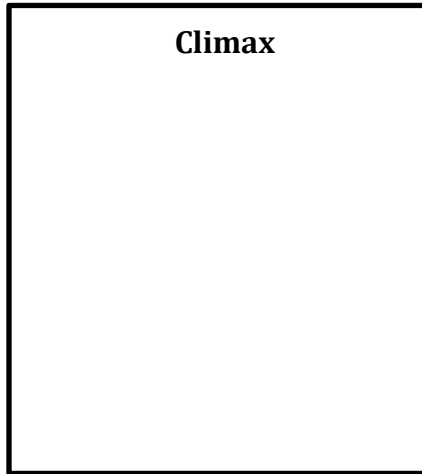
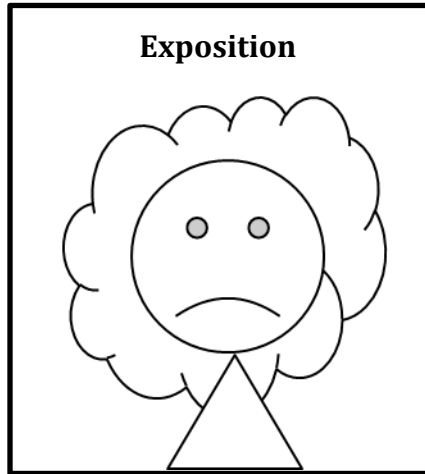
Next, we can start to develop the story of your play. What will happen to the characters? Will they go on an adventure? Will they solve a mystery? Write a one sentence summary of your play here:

Now, we can get specific. We can use a sequencing graphic organizer to clarify the main events of the play. This style of thinking about playwriting was popularized by playwright and critic Elinor Fuchs.

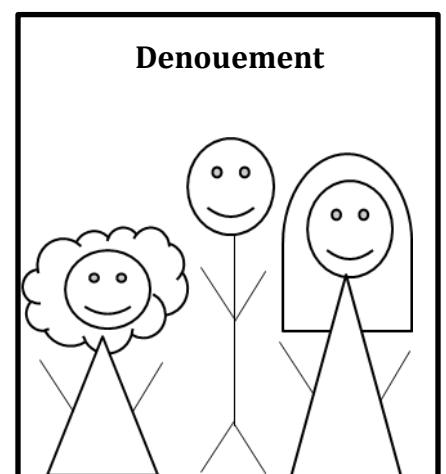
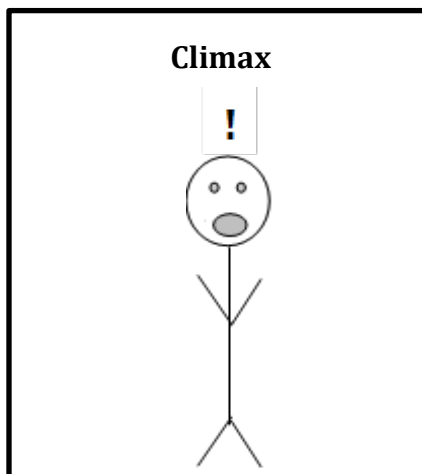
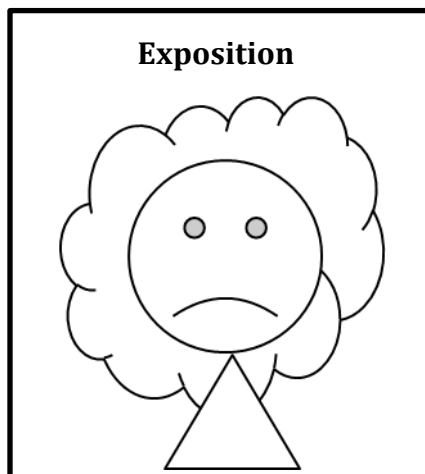
You will start with three empty boxes. In the first box, draw a picture of what your characters are doing at the start of the play. For example, if you were diagramming *Annie*, you might draw a picture of Annie looking sad. The beginning of a play is called the “**exposition**.”

| Exposition | Climax | Denouement |
|---|--------|------------|
|  | | |

Next, in the last box, draw a picture of what your characters are doing at the end of the play. For *Annie*, this might be a picture of Annie smiling happily with Daddy Warbucks and Grace. The ending of a play is called the “**denouement**,” which is French for “untying.” Basically, this is just a fancy word for the resolution.



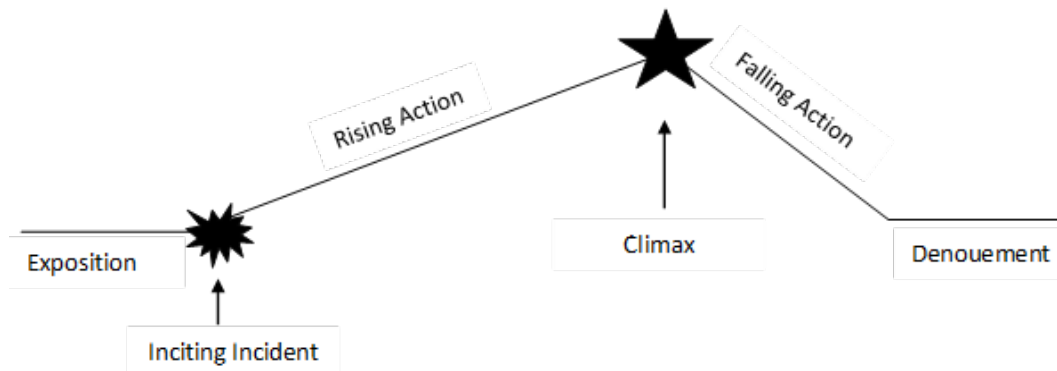
Now, all that is left is the middle box. This is where you will draw a picture of the **climax** of your story. In a tragedy, the climax is where your main character's luck changes from good to bad, or, in a comedy, from bad to good. This is also where the action and tension of the story reach their highest points. It is the moment when a monster is defeated or a detective finds the final clue. To figure out your play's climax, think about your first and last pictures. What has to change to get your characters from the first image to the last? When does that change occur? This moment is the climax of your play. In *Annie*, the climax occurs when Mr. Warbucks finds out that Rooster and Lily are not Annie's real parents, leading him to have the two con artists arrested. This makes sense, as before Annie can be adopted by Mr. Warbucks, she has to learn the truth about her real parents.



Now it's your turn! First, draw a picture of your plays exposition. Then, draw the denouement. Finally, draw the climax. Remember to ask yourself: what has to change to get my characters from the exposition to the denouement? That change will probably happen during the climax.

| | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| <p>Exposition</p> | <p>Climax</p> | <p>Denouement</p> |
|--------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|

Now, you have a rough outline of your play. Of course, there are more events than just the exposition, climax, and resolution. For example, you might want to think about the *inciting incident* of your play. This is the thing that happens right after the exposition that starts the action in motion. For example, in *Annie*, this would be the moment Grace first comes to the orphanage. If you want to make a more detailed outline of your story, you can use this diagram called "Freytag's Pyramid."



Think about what will happen in the *rising and falling action* of your play, or the moments before and after the climax. Write down these events in the order they will occur. As you do this, you are creating a helpful outline for your play!



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While you are outlining, remember, your outline does not have to be perfect! You can always change things or come up with new ideas as you write.

Once you are done outlining, you are ready to start writing. While writing, keep in mind that plays are made up of two different parts: stage directions and dialogue. **Stage directions** are written in *italics* or sometimes (parentheses) or [brackets]. These directions describe what the actors are doing on stage. **Dialogue** is what the actors are actually saying. When you write dialogue, make sure to specify which character is talking. For example, a simple script might look like this:

JANE and SONYA are standing in the kitchen.

JANE: Hey! Did you eat all of my cereal?

SONYA: No.

JANE: Then where is it?

SONYA looks in the cupboard.

SONYA: It's right here, silly.

JANE: Oh. Thank you!

Now you are ready to write your play. Plays can be as long or as short as you want them to be. There is no right number of pages or scenes. Also, playwriting can take a long time, so don't feel rushed! Once you are finished with a draft, share it with your friends and caregivers. You could even get some people together to perform it! Happy writing!

Glossary

Plot: The plot is the “what” of your play. It includes everything that happens from the first to last scene. In Ancient Greece, plays had one simple plot that moved from beginning to end. Other playwrights, like William Shakespeare, wrote plays that have three or even four plots happening at the same time!

Characters: The characters are the “who” of your play. They include every person who will exist in the story. Oftentimes, a published script will include a list of all the characters on the first page. This is called the *dramatis personae*.

Setting: The setting is the “where” of your play. It is important to say where you want the play to take place. If you decide to stage your play, you can use different lighting and costumes to show time of day, weather, and even time period!





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Comedy: A comedy is a play in which the main character's luck turns from bad to good. Oftentimes, comedies are funny, but they do not have to be. Some famous comedies include *Annie*, *The Music Man*, and almost every Disney musical!

Tragedy: A tragedy is a play in which the main character's luck turns from good to bad. Things do not usually work out so well for tragic protagonists, many of whom end up dead, injured, or imprisoned. Some famous tragedies include *Romeo and Juliet*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *The Crucible*.

Protagonist: This is the main character of a play. Without this character, the events of the story would not be able to happen. The protagonist also typically goes through the most change throughout the course of the story.

Motivations: In a play, a character's motivation is why they choose to do the things they do. To determine a character's motivations, ask yourself what they want and how they are going to get it. Figuring out a character's motivation is an important part of playwriting, and it is also a valuable acting technique.

Exposition: This is the first scene of your play. What does the world in this play look like in the beginning, before anything happens?

Denouement: This is the end of your play. What does the world look like now, and how is that different from the beginning of the play? How do things resolve? Do the characters get what they deserve? Why or why not?

Climax: This moment is the center of your play. In a tragedy, this is when the character's luck turns from good to bad. In a comedy, this is when the characters' luck turns from bad to good. In playwriting, this moment is sometimes also referred to as the "reversal," or, in ancient Greek, the *peripeteia*.

Inciting incident: This is the event that sets the play into motion. Oftentimes, it occurs when something unexpected happens that changes the status quo established in the exposition.

Rising Action: The rising action is the domino effect of events that happen because of the inciting incident and leading up to the climax.

Falling Action: The falling action happens after the climax. It is typically not that long. It includes the consequences of the climax, positive or negative.





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Stage directions: Stage directions explain what the characters are doing physically. They are written in *italics*, (parentheses), or [brackets] and are not usually read out loud in performance.

Dialogue: These are the words that the actors are speaking to one another. In performance, these words are spoken by actors.