**PENDRAGON YOUNG PLAYWRIGHTS’ WORKSHOP**

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.

It 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? Two or more distinct [settings](http://www.playwriting101.com/glossary#setting) requires a set change in the middle of an already short play. Not a good thing.

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.

**Theatricality:** Plays are inherently different than film or television scripts. What makes your play theatrical? Remember: it will be performed live on stage in front of an audience. A play is also different than a short story or novel: in a play, the story can be revealed through action, rather than narration. What makes your play active?

**A Few Helpful Hints**

**tips useful as you imagine, write and revise.**

**Remember, though: these are only tips. Suggestions. That’s it. Not rules. When it comes to the world of your play, you get to pick the limits and laws of the universe. You’re the playwright—that means you’re in charge.**

**So: Maybe the laws of gravity don’t apply to your hero. Maybe your play takes place at the very beginning of time, or the very end. Your characters might be average, everyday people living in Kentucky at the present moment, right now. Or they might be two-hundred-year-old Argentine ghosts. Or carpenter ants. Or hallucinations, or elephants, or zombies, or trees, or talking paper clips. You decide.**

**A few guiding principles to get you started. But after that, go crazy. Have fun. Make a mess. Scare someone silly, crack the crowd up laughing, or leave them scratching their heads. The only limits are the borders of your own imagination. We can’t wait to see what you come up with.**

**GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

1. **WHAT’S YOUR PROBLEM?!**

**There should be some sort of conflict at the heart of your play. In a ten-minute play especially, it’s important to introduce the conflict quickly (EXPOSITION)—within the first three pages, probably—so there’s plenty of time to develop, explore and finally resolve it. (For instance: Two monsters both want to eat the same giant cheeseburger billboard. Neither is willing to share. The purple monster called dibs, but the green monster has bigger claws… )**

**Setting: Where does the play take place? When? What year? What time of day? Is it hot outside? Snowing? What does it smell like? How does the setting help you tell your story?**

1. **WHADDA YA WANT?**

**Your characters—whether human, zombie, or superhero—should be guided by strong, clear motivations. What do they want? What’s at stake for them right now: what do they stand to lose or gain? What choices do they have to make? What obstacles do they face? Do they change during the play? How? Why?**

**It’s interesting to explore how competing motivations (INCITING ACTION - COMPLICATIONS) affect the way two or more characters relate to one another. What happens onstage when characters want different things?**

**Character: Who are the characters that populate your play? How old are they? Where are they from? What kind of mood are they in today? And how is character revealed in your play? Through language? Mannerism? Action? Dress?**

1. **TICK, TICK, TICK…**

**You also need an internal “clock”: something built into the architecture of your play that creates a sense of urgency, pressure, or drive. Why must this conflict be dealt with right now? An effective internal clock will give your play the momentum it needs to hook an audience. For instance: A jewel thief breaks into the city museum and trips a silent alarm. The police will arrive in six and a half minutes. The clock is ticking: the jewel thief has just six and a half minutes to pull off the heist. If she takes too long, she’ll be caught.**

**The “clock” doesn’t have to be literal. How about this: Mary, Peter and John are having dinner in a fancy restaurant. When Peter excuses himself to use the restroom, John confesses his love to Mary—but Mary’s dating Peter! And he’ll be back from the bathroom any minute now. The imminence of Peter’s return gives John and Mary’s conversation an extra charge.**

1. **…BOOM!**

**The play should build toward a climax: (CRISIS AND CATASTROPHE) an eruption, a boiling point, a moment when everything comes to a head. A defendant in a criminal trial, having emphatically insisted on his innocence, finally buckles under the pressure of interrogation, leaps from the bench and admits his guilt! And nothing will ever be the same…**

1. **LIFE ON THE OTHER SIDE**

**Guide your play toward a resolution. (DENOUEMENT) After the climax, what has changed? Does a conflict get solved? Is a misunderstanding corrected? Or maybe things become even more complicated? Perhaps old friends become mortal enemies. The choice is yours. But remember: Even if your audience doesn’t know it, the whole play is leading someplace from the very first line. Know the conclusion you’re writing toward, so you can construct the play to get there.**

**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. 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.

**Top Ten Tips**

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."**

**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.**

**THE PHILADELPHIA** by David Ives

**CHARACTERS**: Al: California Cool; 20s or 30s Mark: frazzled; 20s or 30s Waitress: weary

**SETTING**: A restaurant. A table, red-checkered cloth, two chairs and a specials board.

**AL** is at the restaurant table, with the **WAITRESS**

**WAITRESS:** Can I help you?

**AL:** Do you know you would look fantastic on a wide screen?

**WAITRESS**: Uh-huh.

**AL**: Seventy millimeters.

**WAITRESS:** Look. Do you want to see a menu, or what?

**AL:** Let’s negotiate, here. What’s the soup du jour today?

**WAITRESS:** Soup of the day you got a choice of Polish duck blood or cream of kidney.

**AL:** Beautiful. Beautiful! Kick me in a kidney.

**WAITRESS:** (Writes it down) You got it.

**AL:** Any oyster crackers on your seabed?

**WAITRESS:** Nope. All out.

**AL:** How about the specials today, spread out your options.

**WAITRESS:** You got your deep-fried gizzards.

**AL:** Fabulous.

**WAITRESS:** Calves’ brains with okra.

**AL:** You are a temptress.

**WAITRESS:** And pickled pigs’ feet.

**AL:** Pigs. feet. I love it. Put me down for a quadruped.

**WAITRESS:** If you say so.

**AL:** Any sprouts to go on those feet?

**WAITRESS:** Iceberg.

**AL:** So be it.

(**WAITRESS** exits, as **MARK** enters, looking shaken and bedraggled.)

**MARK:** Al!

**AL:** Hey, there, Marcus. What’s up?

**MARK:** Jeez!

**AL:** What’s going on, buddy?

**MARK:** I don’t get it, Al. I don’t understand it.

**AL:** You want something? Want a drink? I’ll call the waitress…

**MARK:** No! No! Don’t even try. (Gets a breath.) I don’t know what’s going on today, Al. But it’s weird.

**AL:** What, like…?

**MARK:** Right from the time I got up.

**AL:** What is it? What’s the story?

**MARK:** Well—just for an example. This morning I stopped off at a drug store to buy some aspirin. This is at a big drug store, right?

**AL:** Yeah…

**MARK:** I go up to the counter, the guy says “What can I do for you?” I say, “Give me a bottle of aspirin.” The guy gives me this funny look and he says, “Oh, we don’t have that, sir.” I said to him, “You’re a drug store and you don’t have any aspirin?”

**AL:** Did they have Bufferin?

**MARK:** Yeah!

**AL:** Advil?

**MARK:** Yeah!

**AL:** Extra-strength Tylenol?

**MARK:** Yeah!

**AL:** But no aspirin.

**MARK:** No!

**AL:** Wow…

**MARK:** And that’s the kind of weird thing that’s been happening all day. It’s like, I go to a newsstand to buy the DAILY NEWS, the guy never even heard of it.

**AL:** Could have been a misunderstanding.

**MARK:** I asked every place—nobody had the news! I had to read the TORONTO HAIRDRESSER. Or this. I go into a Deli at lunchtime to buy a sandwich, the guy tells me they don’t have any Pastrami. How can they be a Deli if they don’t have Pastrami?

**AL:** Was this a Korean deli?

**MARK:** This was a Kosher from Jerusalem Deli. “Oh, we don’t carry that, sir.” He says to me. “Have some tongue.”

**AL:** Mmm.

**MARK:** I just got into a cab, the guy says he doesn’t go to 56th street! He offers to take me to Newark instead!

**AL:** Mm-hm.

**MARK:** Looking at me like I’m an alien or something!

**AL:** Mark. Settle down.

**MARK:** “Oh, I don’t go there, sir.”

**AL:** Settle down. Take a breath.

**MARK:** Do you know what this is?

**AL:** Sure. MARK: What is it? What’s happening to me?

**AL:** Don’t panic. You’re in a Philadelphia.

**MARK:** I’m in a what?

**AL:** You’re in a Philadelphia. That’s all.

**MARK:** But I’m in—

**AL:** Yes, physically you’re in New York. But, metaphysically, you’re in a Philadelphia.

**MARK:** I’ve never heard of this!

**AL:** You see, inside of what we know as reality there are these pockets, these black holes called Philadelphias. If you fall into one, you run up against exactly the kinda stuff that’s been happening to you all day.

**MARK:** Why?

**AL:** Because in a Philadelphia, no matter what you ask for, you can’t get it. You ask for something, they’re not going to have it. You want to do something, it ain’t gonna get done. You want to go somewhere, you can’t get there from here.

**MARK:** Good God. So this is very serious.

**AL:** Just remember, Marcus, this is a condition named for the town that invented the Cheese Steak. Something that nobody in his right mind would willingly ask for.

MARK: And I thought I was just having a very bad day…

**AL:** Sure. Millions of people have spent entire lifetimes inside a Philadelphia and never even knew it. Look at the city of the Philadelphia itself. Hopelessly trapped forever inside a Philadelphia. And do they know it?

**MARK:** Well, what can I do? Should I just kill myself now and get it over with?

**AL:** You try to kill yourself in a Philadelphia, you’re only gonna get hurt, babe.

**MARK:** So, what do I do?

**AL:** Best thing you can do is wait it out. Someday the great cosmic train will risk you outa the City of Brotherly Love and off to someplace happier.

**MARK:** You’re pretty mellow today.

**AL:** Yeah, well. Everybody has to be someplace.