



# Playwriting: 10 Days to PLAY

## Youth Playwriting Lesson Planning Guide

Dear Educator,

The 10 Days to Play packet has been designed to give you a 10 day or 2-week plan for your high school (junior high too) students to develop and write a play! This packet is based on playwriting workshops and classes that have been led by playwrights Sarah Grammar and Tonya Hays. They are most proud of their week-long workshop in which students wrote a play in One Week!

This is not meant to be an all-inclusive method. Theory and history are not discussed. This is a bare-bones, get it done and have students enjoy it, kind of a packet.

This packet has also been designed so you can give it to a student to do while they are home, out of school for a virus “which shall not be named” here.

Our goal is to empower more students to write and submit plays to the Mississippi Theatre Association’s Youth Playwriting Competition, (designed for high school students).

### **Why Should Your Students Do This?**

1. The winner receives a \$250 cash prize and free registration for MTA and one-night lodging for the night of their reading.
2. Plays are read by qualified professionals.
3. A staged reading of the play will take place at MTA.

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4. Winning plays will be submitted to a publishing company for consideration.
5. (Most of All) Playwriting can be fun!

This packet includes the link to the [MTA Playwriting for Youth Submission Page](#). It is important to note that the deadline for uploading is Oct. 1. There is NO COST and It is FREE and easy to do.

## **Warm Up Writing Exercise**

Overall on the writing days, it is great to start the sessions with a game or fun writing exercise to ignite imagination and creativity. The following are some great examples.

**Identity Game** - This is a great example of an opener. Students make a circle of chairs. One person stands in the middle. This person does not have a chair. They make a Statement, e.g “I am a cat person.” Everyone sitting in the circle must change chairs. The person in the center tries to get to an empty chair during the switch. Whoever is left standing must make a statement about their identity and the game continues in this format.

**Balloon Game** - Have students blow up balloons for you. Ask them for words. Write words on the balloons with a sharpie. Stand in a circle and send the balloons up in the air. Everyone tries to keep them aloft. When one falls, the student near it must pick it up and tell a story about it.

**Story Web** - Students are seated on the floor in a circle. One student holds a ball of yarn and begins a story. They toss it to someone across the circle who continues the story. A web is built by the time the last person accepts the yarn ball. You can also reverse this process to continue the story or tell another as you wind the yarn ball back up.

**Paper Airplane** - I love this exercise because it truly brings home what a play is. Bring in brightly colored pieces of paper -- neon is best. Have each student pick a color. Write on the paper their name, their true name. This may be different than their legal name. It might be a name they wish they had. They also write one sentence about their life that captures their essence. Students fold their pieces of paper into paper airplanes. Some will be great and some will be... well duds, mine usually are. Students make two lines across from each other. One at a time, they state their name, the one on the plane, and then launch the plane trying to share the sentence they wrote before it hits the ground. They have to stop talking when the plane stops flying. They are allowed to share and explain the full sentence before the next person. The exercise illustrates the importance of a title (the name) and the brevity of the world of the play.

**Sacred Object** - Have students bring an object to class that is very special to them. They will spend a bit of time really looking at it and examining it and then write a monologue as if they were the object and share it with the class.

## **So Where To Begin? At The Beginning Of Course! (Days 1 and 2)**

What to write about? This question can be incredibly overwhelming for all of us.

How to begin? Think about a personal story that means a lot to you, a funny story, an embarrassing moment, a sad story. For inspiration watch excerpts from High School Students in the [Moth Grand Slam](#).

If you are using this unit in class you can assign students to develop and share a personal story. The Moth also has some wonderful [resources for educators](#) as well as links to podcasts of student's stories

[The Moth Tips for Storytelling Safety and Best Practices](#) has some great thoughts about what makes a great story, the same principles that make a great play.

If the student is virtual they can share their story through a recording of course.

Following the sharing of personal stories, students can get in small groups and pick one of the stories and think about how to share this story by showing it. What elements to show and not tell? They will recognize the power of theatre to show and not tell.

Virtual students can take their story, write it out and then see how they can change moments into dialogue, stage directions, etc.

The next step is to script it. Students should understand that the first draft is just that, a first draft.

## **Additional Great Writing Inspiration Can Come From Unexpected Places**

**Writing Story Circle** is another great (in class) exercise that students love and will truly get their imaginations going. Here's how it works:

- Everyone has a piece of paper.
- They write for one a minute (you can change this time to fit your class parameters).
- They start their story when you, as the timer, say "go."
- The point is to not think and to write quickly.
- After the allotted time, they pass their paper to the left or right and the next person reads it.
- After everyone has read the paper they add to the story for the allotted time.
- Then it is passed again and the process is repeated.
- The papers continue to be passed around the writing story circle.
- The person next to the writer, who began the story, must conclude it.
- These stories will be wild and the students will enjoy reading them aloud.

- Encourage them to write without judgment on themselves or the other writers.
- Some amazing plays have come out of this exercise!

Of course, there are many other fun storytelling fun exercises that you can use. Envision has a great cross-disciplinary resource for [storytelling tips and tricks](#)

Theatre Folk also has some great [playwriting prompts](#) and exercises as well.

Students may have their own ideas about the play they wish to write. The previous activities are only some fun jump-starts.

## **So, You Know What You Want To Write -- Now What? (Day 3 and 4)**

At this point, you may wish to review the rules with your students for the MTA playwright competition. This way they will be planning for no more than 6 characters and know that their play is a one-act.

[Lin Manuel Miranda talks with some high school students](#) in the Bronx about his creative process.

**As students being to write you may wish to discuss the following:**

### **Basic Questions to Ask about your play.**

- What do I need to tell?
- Why do I need to tell it?
- Who needs to hear it?

### **What Makes A Good Story?**

- Beginning, middle, and end
- A great set-up of your world
- A definition of what each character wants and needs and how they are going to get it.

### **Challenge your students to create:**

- Compelling characters that we care about in conflict.
- Use some type of structure
- Dialogue should be interesting and natural
- Think about what is theatrical, what can you do in live theatre that you can't do in film.

- Don't write in generalizations. Be specific!
- Think about what might be too much.
- Choose an interesting setting, not a park bench

You can of course tie in the structure of a play here. Prologue /Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Denouement. This is a [Plot Structure interactive PowerPoint](#) that you can share with your students. There are other great diagrams on several sites.

Another inspiration is [Joseph Campbell's The Hero's Journey](#). This is an excellent breakdown of the most popular story structure in history.

Kurt Vonnegut has a great talk about [Story Structure](#).

As you get more and more into the development of the play one of our favorite resources is Teaching [Playwriting in Schools - Teachers Handbook by Centerstage](#).

Also, Arena Stage has an excellent [guide for scriptwriting](#).

**As the students continue writing and crafting dialogue some pitfalls to avoid include:**

- Having a narrator instead of having the characters address the audience.
- Too little/ or too much information in dialogue vs. what can be shown and not told.
- Recycled lines from movies or T. V. Shows. They need to think about the manner in which their characters speak and write naturally true to the character.
- Sometimes there is too little dialogue.

It is a great idea to read some of the dialogue aloud to see how it sounds.

As Day 4 Concludes have students get in a reading group or with a partner and read each other's work. Before they discuss and comment on each other's work, introduce them to the basics [Liz Lerman Critical Response](#) technique. You can also explore a more [extended version](#) of the technique. If you would like to teach the [Lerman Method, check out this PowerPoint](#)

## **So You have Draft Now What? (Day 5)**

Day 5 should be devoted to rewriting. Sometimes students don't want to do this BUT hopefully, they will be inspired by discussing their work with a partner or reading group, or in the case of a virtual student, with you.

## **Reading Groups (Day 6 and 7)**

Assign the student to a new reading group. Playwrights are not to read but to listen only and make notes. If a student is virtual, suggest they get with family members or friends virtually to read their work and listen to it.

## Final Rewrite (Day 8)

This is their last major rewriting effort as part of the class. At some point in the writing process, I think it is important to introduce the students to the proper play submission format. I love the guide offered on the AATE, [Young Playwrights for Change](#) page.

If you are a middle school teacher the Young Playwrights for Change is a wonderful competition.

## Staged Readings (Day 8 and 9)

This is a perfect opportunity to introduce staged readings to your students. If you can borrow some music stands and make it an event, it takes on additional importance. The following book has some excellent reviews on Amazon and was recommended on the Theatre Educator's Page. If this is an area of interest that you would like to develop, you might consider ordering the book. I've attended several readings over zoom as well.

[Staged Reading Magic. A Play Producer's Quick Guide for Turning a Free Staged Reading into a Hot Theater Ticket.](#) by Carole Schweid

Sam Graber's "[Staged Reading Do's and Don'ts](#)" is a great article on this topic.

### Tips for your classroom staged reading:

- Have someone assigned to stage directions.
- When actors are in the scene they stand, raising their music stand. This way you don't have to indicate if they have entered or exited through stage directions.
- Not all stage directions need to be read, specifically actor's cues, i. E. "she says with a smile. "
- Have a student facilitator at the end to go through the Liz Lerman Critical Response after each piece. The playwright of course is the artist.

## Final Changes (Day 10)

Students make final changes to their plays and [submit to MTA](#). Please double-check the rules for the submission.

## Additional Resources

It is great to help students think outside the box. A couple of great scripts that I like to pull scenes from are."

[Animated Conversations by Alan Haehnel](#): Short Scenes between Inanimate Objects and Human Characters.

[Door to Door by Flip Kobler and Cindy Marcus](#): Short scenes that have to do with doors we pass through in our lives.

[A Boy, A Girl, A Bench](#) by Mark Dunn is a short play that illustrates how actors can show and not tell. I have used this in many classes and students, high school and college enjoy working with it.

If you want to start with 10 Minute Plays, Gary Garrisons' [A More Perfect 10: Writing and Producing the 10 Minute Play](#) is excellent. The book was written for adults and does contain some language. Writing at 10 Minute Play may seem more feasible to some students. Several of my students have started with a 10 Minute Play and then fleshed it out to a fuller length one-act.