

The Art of the Ten-Minute Play tips for young writers

Hey there, young playwright! Below you'll find a few helpful hints to consider as you set out to write a ten-minute play. We hope you'll find these 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.

Here are 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.



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—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...

Whaddya 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 affect the way two or more characters relate to one another. What happens onstage when characters want different things?

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.

...BOOM!

The play should build toward a climax: 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...

Life on the other side.

Guide your play toward a resolution. 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.



More food for thought:

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?

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?

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*?

Getting started...

Feeling stumped or stuck? Try this: Make a list of 5 different conflicts, 5 “clocks,” and 5 settings or places. Pick one from each category at random, and see where your imagination takes you. *Reading* plays is also a great way for a writer to find inspiration. You can find some at your local library. If you read a play and love it, think about *why*. What makes it so good? How does it work?

Have fun! And when you’re done, don’t forget to **send us your play!** Contest guidelines are available at www.actorsTheatre.org/New-Voices-Contest-Festival. The deadline for the 15th annual New Voices Young Playwrights Festival is October 31, 2019.