

Playwriting for Key Stage 2

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1. Introduction

What are some differences between a play and a story?

Exercise:

Read the following: What's different? What's the same?

a)

The sun was shining. The sand was so hot it stung your feet. Ben sat on the beach, eating an ice cream. Strawberry, his favourite.

"Let me have a lick," his sister, Marcia, asked.

"Maybe," said Ben, and he continued to eat the ice-cream.

"Pleeeeeeeeeeease," said Marcia.

Ben ignored her. There was no way she was going to get any, he thought.

"Please, Ben..." she said.

Ben took an extra big lick of ice-cream. "Yum," he said.

Marcia scowled. She really hated her brother some times. She went to snatch the ice-cream from him, but it fell – plop! - onto the sand.

"Marcia! You little-"

"I'll tell Mum!"

b)

A beach. It is very sunny.

BEN, 10 years old, is sitting, eating an ice-cream.

MARCIA, his younger sister, is sitting next to him.

MARCIA: Let me have a lick.

BEN: Maybe.



MARCIA: Pleeeeeeeeeeease.

BEN continues to eat the ice-cream.

MARCIA: Please, Ben.

BEN takes a big lick.

BEN: Yum.

MARCIA tries to grab the ice-cream, but it drops onto the sand.

BEN: Marcia! You little-!

MARCIA: I'll tell Mum!

DISCUSS:

Divide into groups...

- What can you do in a play that you can't in a story?
- What can you do in a story that you can't in a play?

Things to notice:

Plays are mainly people *talking*, and *doing* things. They're about action, and character.

In a play, you don't need lots of description. However, the setting is important and can affect the action (e.g. imagine the same scene taking place in a bus-shelter, in the middle of a storm).

In a play, there are no speech marks.

But it's important you write the name of the character who's speaking at the left-hand side of the page.

In a story, you can write about what someone is thinking. In a play, this is difficult, though a good actor can suggest a lot, e.g. through the expression on their face, the tone of their voice.

A play isn't finished when you've written the script. It comes to life when it's performed.

2. Parts of a script

There are two parts of a script:

- What the actors do – STAGE DIRECTIONS
- What the actors say – DIALOGUE

Look again at the script in part 1...

1) Stage directions

These lines, in italics, are STAGE DIRECTIONS:

A beach. It is very sunny.

BEN, 10 years old, is sitting, eating an ice-cream.

MARCIA, his younger sister, is sitting next to him.

DISCUSS:

What is a stage direction? What are they for?

Why are they written in italics? (You can put them in brackets, but the reason is the same...)

Teacher's Note:

Remember that plays need to be brought to life by others – for example, by actors who will read the lines, or by a designer who will decide what the set and costumes will look like.

It's helpful if you can tell the difference between the stage directions and the dialogue. You don't want the actors to speak the stage directions out loud, it would get very confusing!

A stage direction is an INSTRUCTION. It can...

- Set the scene (tell us where & when we are). E.g:
A forest, in the middle of the night.
- Tell the actors to *do* something:
MRS SMITH is jumping up and down.
- Tell the actor how to say something:
JOHN (*whispers*): Don't tell anyone.

EXERCISE:

Write your own stage directions:

- Choose one of the two characters, BEN or MARCIA.
- Take a blank piece of paper.
- Think of something BEN or MARCIA could do – i.e. an action.
- Write it on your paper as a stage direction, e.g: *BEN eats an ice-cream.*
- Fold up the paper, put it in a bag or box.
- Take turns to draw out a piece of paper, and act out the action written on the paper. (Don't tell anyone what it is!)
- Others try to guess what the stage direction says.

2) Dialogue

These lines are DIALOGUE:

MARCIA: **Let me have a lick.**

BEN: **No way.**

- Dialogue is just another word for speech. It means 'what people say to each other'.
- Remember that you don't need speech marks in a play script.
- But remember to write the name of the character who's speaking in the left-hand margin of the script. Make clear who is saying what.
- Good dialogue tries to capture the way people actually speak, the way the words tumble or trickle out of their mouth...
- For example, if a person is nervous, they might hesitate or stutter:

JOHN: I'm, um, not really, er, you know, s-s-s-sure... what to... um... say...

- Or if they are really excited or happy, they might shout or call out:

JOHN: OH YEEEEEEEEEEEESSS!!!!

EXERCISE:

- Get into pairs. One of you be BEN, one of you MARCIA.
- Have a conversation between your two characters – but *write it down*, line by line. Think what your character might say.
- Act out the finished version.

3. Characters – getting started

There are different ways you can start your play – with an idea, a setting, an image. But one of the simplest, and best, is to create a character

Teacher's Note:

Here is an easy-to-follow guide to creating a character from scratch. Feel free to adapt it to suit the needs of your students...

Each of these stages is intended to spark ideas about ONE character only – from first thoughts to a more detailed understanding. Each stage should reveal something new about that same character..

a) An object

Assemble on a table a group of everyday objects, such as...

- A cinema ticket
- A comic
- A packet of sweets
- A button
- A piece of paper with '5 o'clock, outside train station!' written on it.
- An advert from a newspaper
- A shopping list
- A key-ring and keys

Look at all the objects, and consider each one.

Choose ONE of the objects and think:

- Who might have this in their pocket, or in their bag?
- What kind of person?
- *Why* have they got it?
- It's important to them – but why?

Note down some of these first thoughts about the character.

b) A photograph

Cut or tear out a selection of photographs of people, of different ages and backgrounds, from newspapers or magazines.

Look at the photographs for a few minutes. Choose one.

Teacher's Note:

N.B. this is NOT a photo of their character! It is someone the character knows well.

Think and note down:

- How does your character know this person in the photo?
- What does your character think of this person?
- When did your character last see this person, and why?

c) A smell

Write down a series of evocative smells, e.g.:

- Chips and vinegar
- Disinfectant
- Freshly cut grass
- Petrol fumes
- Suntan lotion
- A baby's nappy

Choose one and note down:

What does this smell remind your character of?
(It should be a memory of something important in their life.)

Teacher's Note:

This is the end of the first phase of creating a character. This focused on sparking an idea, sowing the seeds for an interesting character.

The next step is to develop the character in more detail – to get to know them better!

4. Characters – getting to know them

The best way to know your character is...

ASK QUESTIONS. Don't worry if you don't know the answer – use your imagination and MAKE STUFF UP

a) Quickfire round

Fingers on the buzzers! These are simple, factual questions about the character. Don't think too much, just write down ideas as they pop into your head.

Teacher's Note:

Don't worry if some answers don't fit together neatly, if some ideas contradict others. This is a good thing, and to be encouraged! People aren't always so straightforward, and can be full of surprises...

- What's the character's name? (remember, if not sure – *make it up!*)
- How old are they?
- Where do they live?
- What do they look like?
- 'What do they do?' I.e. What's their job? Or are they a student, or looking after children, or retired, or unemployed?
- What about their family? Do they have brothers or sisters? Children? Parents and/or grandparents?
- What about their friends? Who's their best friend?
- What do they do in their spare time? Do they have any hobbies?
- What makes them sad, or angry?
- Do they have any secrets? If so, what?

- *What really matters to them?*

THIS LAST QUESTION IS THE MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL – IF YOU KNOW WHAT MATTERS TO YOUR CHARACTER, WHAT THEY CARE ABOUT MORE THAN ANYTHING, IT WILL HELP YOU LATER WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT THE PLOT. IT MIGHT BE SOMETHING YOU'VE ALREADY MENTIONED, OR A NEW IDEA

b) Adding detail

Here are some simple questions that if you answer in more depth and detail, will help you discover a lot more about the character. Use one, or all of them, or make up your own...

- **What did your character have for breakfast?**

What exactly did they eat & drink? Where did they have it? When? Who with? What was on their mind? Etc

- **Describe your character's room.**

What's in the cupboards? What's on the walls? What can you see from the window?

- **Think of a special memory your character has, from when they were young.**

Where are they? Who's with them? What's happening? How do they feel when they recall this memory now?

EXERCISE

In pairs, or small groups, share what you've discovered about your character.

For example, tell others what your character had for breakfast, or what their room is like – see if they can guess what the character is like from that description.

5. Characters – their voice

Good dialogue, what the characters say, is vital to playwriting.

Therefore, you need to know how they speak - to hear in your head the voice of your character. One way to test this out is to WRITE A SPEECH for them...

a) Guided speech

Finish these sentences. Write as if the character is speaking. Think: how would they say this, what words might they use?

My name's....

I like...

I hate...

The best thing that ever happened to me was...

My worst memory is...

My dream, what I'd most like, is...

(Note, for this last sentence it's useful to remember what really matters to your character.)

b) Free speech

Imagine your character in a situation where they are trying to impress someone. They are telling the other person about something they're good at...

OR

Imagine your character in a situation where they are trying to apologise for something...

EXERCISE

Take turns to read out your speeches. Try to say the lines as you imagine the character would speak.

6. Characters – who else will be in the play?

One character isn't, usually, enough for a play. You need at least two, maybe three, four or more.

Before you start writing your play, it's useful to think about who the other characters might be

a) Who else does your character know?

EXERCISE

Make a list of...

- Family
- Friends
- Enemies or rivals
- Other people at school or work or where they live

Imagine what might happen when you put any of these people with your main character. Will sparks fly? Is there a strong connection between them? Might it lead to an interesting scene?

Circle the names of the people who might be exciting or useful to have in the play.

b) Who else might they meet?

Think about what matters to your character. What do they care about, what's their big dream?

What do they WANT?

Who might help them to achieve this?

Who might make it more difficult?

For example, if your character really cares about:

- singing

And what they want is:

- to win a talent show

They *might* want to talk to...

- A good singing teacher
- Cheryl Cole
- One of the judges for the contest

They *wouldn't* want to meet...

- A bad singing teacher
- Ashley Cole
- A jealous rival

EXERCISE

Make a list of people who might *help* your character, and those who might *hinder* them, make things difficult.

When you've thought more about who else might be in the play...

Get to know those characters better too!

YOU'RE ALMOST READY TO START WRITING YOUR PLAY...

7. Structure – scenes and how to use them

What is a scene?

Like books, plays are made up of different parts. In a book, these are called chapters. In a play, they are called scenes.

Scenes are very useful. Each scene will show an important part of the plot. By ending one scene, and starting a new one, you can MISS OUT THE BORING BITS.

When working on your play, ask yourself – *is this interesting, is it crucial for the plot?* If the answer is no, then miss it out, and start a new scene.

Scenes allow you to...

- Jump ahead in time. E.g. to 5 minutes or 2 hours later, or the next day, or years in the future.
- Change location. E.g. if Scene 1 is in the park, Scene 2 might be at school, Scene 3 at home.
- Note – always write at the beginning of the scene *where* and *when* the scene is set.

EXERCISE

Take a story that you know well, for example 'Cinderella'. Think about the different parts of the story - what might you show if you were making it into a play, and what might you miss out?

Write an outline of the structure of the play, for example:

Scene 1: the kitchen of Cinderella's house. The ugly sisters and their mum are mean to Cinderella.

Scene 2: the next morning. At breakfast table. An invitation for the ball arrives.

Scene 3: the day of the ball. The kitchen. Cinderella left alone, sweeping. The fairy godmother appears...

Etc.



FOR YOUR OWN PLAY:

- *Map out a possible structure for your own play. Write a sentence or two to outline the key event in each scene.*
- *Look at the structure – does this look interesting and exciting? Does it make you want to start writing?*
- *Note – don't be limited by your first ideas. If a better, more interesting idea emerges as you write, follow this instead!*

8. Plot – the beginning

Teacher's Note

Plot is another word for the story. In drama, 'plot' is the word more commonly used. The plot is what happens.

To illustrate some ideas about plot and structure, sample scenes are included if useful...

SCENE ONE

What's the most important thing to do in an opening scene?

- You might know your characters really well, but the audience don't. They don't know anything about them.
- So how will you introduce the characters, quickly and easily?

Ask yourself:

- a) Who is the main character? Who is this play really about?
- b) What is he or she like?
- c) What matters to this character? What do they really want right now?

For example:

- a) The main character is Marcia.
- b) She's 8 years old, energetic, moody, ambitious and loves singing. She doesn't like her brother, Ben, as he's trying to spoil things for her.
- c) The most important thing to her right now is to enter the school talent show and win.

FOR YOUR OWN PLAY, THINK:

- *How might you show this to an audience?*
- *What might happen, that would help your audience understand the situation quickly and easily?*
- *Who should be in the first scene?*
- *Where are we?*
- *When is the scene taking place?*

Teacher's Note

Don't explain everything try to *show* it instead.

For example, if two characters don't get on, it's better to show them arguing rather than have them say 'I don't like you' / 'I don't like you either!'. Audiences aren't deaf they prefer to work things out for themselves.

Sample Scene 1:

MARCIA's room, evening. MARCIA is wearing a cool, sparkly jacket and practising a dance routine to 'Umbrella' by Rihanna, in front of her mirror.

MARCIA (*sings*): 'Underneath my um-be-rella,
Ella, ella, ella...'

BEN enters, carrying a magic wand.

BEN: What's that noise, it sounds like cats screeching?

MARCIA: Out! No annoying brothers allowed.

BEN: I seriously hope you're not practising for the talent show tomorrow?

MARCIA: So what if I am?

BEN: Because there is NO WAY you can win. Not when you're up against the world's greatest magician...

He reaches behind MARCIA's ear, pulls out a bunch of flowers.

BEN: Ta-dah! I'm going to win that first prize – two kids tickets to Disneyland. One for me, one for... Anyone in the world apart from you.

MARCIA: Dream on.

BEN: And what are you *wearing*?

MARCIA: It's new. Mum bought it for me.

BEN: What?? That's sooooo not fair.

MARCIA: Jealous.

BEN: No. Look. No hard feelings?

He offers her his hand to shake. She shakes it – and gets a shock from the buzzer he's hidden in his palm.

BEN: Loser!

BEN runs out.

MARCIA: Ben!!

9. Plot – making things difficult

To make your plot more dramatic, it's a good idea to make things difficult for your main character.

If they get what they want too quickly or easily, the play will be boring and obvious.

SCENE TWO

One way to do this is to MAKE A BAD THING HAPPEN to your main character.

Think about what they want, what's important to them, and put an obstacle in their way.

- E.g if your main character wants to impress someone, Scene Two could show them make a fool of themselves in front of that person.
- Or if your main character has been saving up to buy something special, in Scene Two they might lose their money, or someone might steal it.

***Remember, don't waste time showing the audience boring bits!
Jump to the next important part...***

FOR YOUR PLAY:

- Write a list of some bad things that could happen to your main character.
- Think – what would really make it difficult (but not impossible!) for them to get what they want?
- Then in your Scene 2 – make this bad thing happen!

Sample Scene 2:

MARCIA's room. The next morning. Her sparkly jacket is hanging from a chair.

BEN sneaks in.

BEN: I 'll show her.



He puts something in the inner pocket of the jacket.

She'll dance like she's never danced before.

MARCIA enters. BEN is surprised.

MARCIA: Hey! I thought I told you – private!

BEN: Sorry, sis.

MARCIA: Get out!

BEN: OK, OK, stop stressing.

BEN goes.

MARCIA: Better practise one last time...

10. Plot – crucial moment

The next scene should contain your CRUCIAL MOMENT.

This is the most important part of the play, the moment you've been building up to, the bit you want the audience to remember

SCENE THREE

The thing to consider here is: AVOID THE OBVIOUS. There's nothing worse when you're watching a play and you think you know what's going to happen... and that's exactly what *does* happen. It's dull, and predictable.

FOR YOUR OWN PLAY, THINK:

- *How might I surprise the audience?*
- *What's the most obvious thing that could happen, and how can I avoid that?*

Sample Scene 3:

The talent show, at school.

MR GIBB, a teacher, is announcing the next act. BEN and MARCIA are watching from the side of the stage. MARCIA has her jacket slung over her shoulder.

MR GIBB: The competition is reaching boiling point. Ouch! It's sizzling. Only two more acts to go. Who's got what it takes? And so, the next act, can you feel it?, can you feel the magic...? It's Ben Matthews... MR MAGIC!

BEN comes on, with a wand.

BEN: Thank-you, thank-you. Now for my first trick...

He waves his wand – but nothing happens.

Um... for my first trick...

He waves the wand again. Again, nothing happens. He tries again, waves the wand furiously – the flowers fly out and shoot off stage.

Hey! Urm...

The crowd boos. MARCIA sniggers.

BEN walks off stage, dejected.

MR GIBB: Mr Not-Quite-So Magic... Um... Thanks. And finally, showing off her dance moves, to the groove... It's Marcia Matthews...

*MARCIA puts on her sparkly jacket and walks on-stage.
The music starts up.*

But MARCIA suddenly feels very, very itchy. She starts to jerk and jump around the stage.

BEN: Hah! My itching powder seems to be working...

MARCIA dances jerkily, completely out of control. She runs off stage, upset.

MR GIBB: Thank-you, Marcia, for that... *unusual* style of dancing. Now, it's the moment you've all been waiting for - who will win those tickets to Disneyland...?

11. Plot – resolutions

How should you finish your play? Do you want to wrap things up neatly or leave them hanging, unresolved?

This is the most important part of the play, the moment you've been building up to, the bit you want the audience to remember

SCENE FOUR

- Think beyond what the main character wants. They might not get what they want – but could something else, something better, happen?
- Or maybe they *do* get what they want, but it turns out to be a disappointment, or leads to something even more important?

For example, MARCIA wants to win the talent show. But also, she and her brother don't get on very well. So what might happen that could improve that situation...?

Teachers' Note

Encourage your students to think beyond the obvious ending for their plays. What might be the aftermath? What's still left unresolved, that might take the plot that one step further?

Sample Scene 4:

MARCIA's room. One hour later.

MARCIA is sitting on her bed, upset.

There's a knock on the door.

MARCIA: Go away!

BEN (*from outside*): It's me. Can I come in?

MARCIA: No.

BEN comes in anyway. MARCIA ignores him.

BEN: You didn't stay for the prizes.

MARCIA: No point.

BEN: So you don't know who won?

MARCIA: Don't care.

BEN: Really? But it was...

BEN produces two tickets with 'Disneyland' on them.

MARCIA: You??

BEN: No. I was rubbish. It's *you*.

MARCIA can't believe it.

Honestly. Mr Gibb said he'd never seen anyone dance like that, ever. He said it was incredible.

He hands her the tickets.

Congratulations, sis.

She takes them, but still can't quite believe it.

MARCIA: Thanks. Wow.

BEN: And I'm sorry too. For what I did.

MARCIA: Hey – it helped me win!

BEN: So who are you going to take? Alice? Joy? Emily?

MARCIA thinks about this for a moment.

Julie? Sherelle? Dani?

MARCIA: I'm going to take you.

BEN: Whaaaat??



MARCIA: Unless you don't want to go?

BEN: Hang on. Is this a trick?

MARCIA: No trick. Shake on it.

BEN goes to shake her hand. He gets a shock from the buzzer she's got in her hand.

BEN: Aargh! Very funny.

MARCIA: I know.

BEN: Can I still come though?

MARCIA: Of course!

They both smile.

12. Re-writing and editing

Teacher's Note

As in any kind of writing, it's useful and important to re-read your work and ask:
How can I make it better?

Any professional writer will tell you that a story, poem or play very rarely pops out fully formed, neat and perfect. Some things won't be clear. Some things might be boring. Some things might be missing. That's normal!

RE-WRITING MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN AVERAGE PLAY AND A GREAT ONE.

So always, always re-read what you've done and think how you could improve it. Yes, it's hard work, but it will be worth it. With a play, these questions may be helpful:

- Have I introduced the characters and the plot clearly? If someone who doesn't know the play reads it, will it make sense?
- Is the main character's story interesting enough? Is this something I would like to watch myself?
- Are there any boring bits? If so – cut them out.
- Are there enough jokes in it? Or moments of excitement or tension? Or strong emotions? (In other words, the sort of thing that makes a play worth watching in the first place!)
- Is the crucial moment a surprise? If not, think of different things that could happen instead. Sometimes, your first idea won't be the best idea.
- Is the ending satisfying? Remind yourself of the situation for the main character at the start of the play. What's different at the end? If the answer is 'not much', you've got a problem. Good drama is about change.
- What's the dialogue like? Read it aloud, listen to how it sounds. Do all the characters sound the same, or does each one have their own distinctive voice and personality?

Teacher's Note

It's also worth a final edit - checking spelling, lay-out of the script etc. If you're going to try to act out the scripts, it's important everyone can read them easily and clearly.

13. The next stage – bringing plays to life

Teacher's Note

This is the fun part! Plays are meant to be brought to life, not studied on the page. The best way to bring this home to your students is to encourage them to read out or perform their own scripts.

There are no rules for this – apart from, make your own rules! Adapt to the circumstances in your classroom, gym or school hall...

You could...

- Read out scripts in small groups in the classroom.
- Show extracts in an assembly.
- Rehearse and stage some of them for parents.
- Get everyone involved! Make your own sets and costumes and design posters.
- Think about the sound effects and lighting.
- Ask your local theatre if you could perform in one of their spaces or if someone from their staff can come to advise you.

14. What next?

There are a few books about playwriting but by far the best way to learn more is to see and read other plays.

Polka Theatre's website: www.polkatheatre.com will tell you what's on or is coming up soon. We're a theatre dedicated to creating plays for primary-school children. Also in London, try:

www.unicorntheatre.com

www.lyric.co.uk

www.littleangeltheatre.com

www.halfmoon.org.uk

Another amazing (and free) resource is the link below to a page on Soho Theatre's website. On this link, you can download 10 years worth of prize-winning scripts written by students in Year Six...

<http://sohotheatre.com/p116.html>

Many of these plays are brim-full of ideas, and fizz with energy and imagination. They're written by children, for children. Try them, you won't be disappointed!

Teacher's Note

Playwriting can be used elsewhere in the curriculum. For example:

- HISTORY – create characters based on historical figures. Playwriting is a great way to get inside a character's head, and imagine what it was like to be that person.
- PHSE – explore difficult issues or situations through imaginary scenarios. Again, playwriting encourages empathy, encourages students to see things from different points of view.
- SCIENCE – explore moments of scientific discovery by re-imagining them; explore ethical dilemmas about the use of new technologies.

Good luck – and happy writing!