

PERFORMING ARTS PACK

Write Plays, Stage Plays, Music Games,
Drama Games, Perform Poetry

How to Write and Sell Your Plays

CENARTH FOX

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Introduction

I LOVE WRITING plays and I'd like to share that love.

Hopefully this book will do at least two things;

- ✓ provide you with play-writing and play-selling skills and
- ✓ fire your enthusiasm.

But this book is not the only thing on offer. Your purchase entitles you to send me up to five emailed questions on any aspect of this book. I will give you a detailed, constructive response to all of your questions. I'll be delighted to help you in your play-writing and play-staging activities.

The world is a lot smaller these days and we could be only a mouse click apart.

Enjoy the following pages, enjoy your writing and, as they say backstage, 'break a leg'.

Cenarth Fox

2016



Don Bradman Lives Next Door

NOW TO BE clear from the beginning, different terms are used to describe different types of writers. You will have heard of a journalist, an author and a novelist. I call a person who writes plays a playwright. And the play, when it appears in print, I call a script.

Oh and my rules for the theatre are:

1. Thou shalt not be boring and
2. Apart from rule number one, there are no rules.

Dummies

You may have seen those books designed for absolute beginners – the How-To books for Dummies where the writer assumes the reader knows next-to nothing.

I'm going to use that idea at least on this page. Bear with me because if you're an experienced writer this will seem unnecessary. But to a beginner it's very important.

Most scripts have three components:

- ✓ character ID
- ✓ dialogue and
- ✓ stage directions

If you clearly understand and can identify all three, you'll go a long way to getting things right.

Here is an excerpt from *Shakespeare the Musical*. The names in bold capitals give us the character ID i.e. JOHN, MARY and WILLIAM. The words spoken by each character (the actors) we call the dialogue and the words in brackets and in italics we call the stage directions.

JOHN

If I go to council, my creditors hound me. And the same goes for church.

MARY

But at least you can only be sacked by the council. If you don't go to church they'll think you're a secret Catholic. (*Pause, MARY worried*)
Oh you're not!

JOHN

Be quiet. And never discuss this in front of the children, especially William.

(*WILLIAM comes alive and moves to his parents. Fade UC light.*
ACTORS enter in upstage darkness and wait C)

WILLIAM

(*Excited*) Father, Mother, I've just seen the most fantastic thing. In the market place there's a group of men. I think they're actors.

The actors do not say the words in brackets. (*Pause, MARY worried*) is not spoken. The playwright suggests the actor pauses during her speech and when she does speak, she is worried.

In the dialogue, a word or words in italics is spoken with an emphasis e.g. "But at least you can only be sacked by the council". Here the word 'sacked' is in italics and the playwright suggests the actor puts an emphasis on that word. Mind you it's only a suggestion. The playwright writes the words but the director decides how they will be spoken.

So we have three simple things – character ID, dialogue and stage directions.

Once you understand these vital components you have the basic tools of the presentation of your script.

This book may indirectly give you ideas for play subjects, topics or themes. But that's a side benefit. My main goal is to provide you with information about how to write your play and then how to have it performed.

How to use this book

Do what you think is best. One way is to read through the chapters from beginning to end doing the tests and homework. Have a notepad handy and make notes as you go. Another way is to have your finished or part-finished play by your side and make notes in it or in your notepad or digital Notepad as you read each chapter. Whatever method you use when reading this book, stick at it. You can always go back over a chapter or chapters once you've read the whole book. Chookas!

Some parts of plays to ponder in this book

Throughout this book I provide short examples of scripts I have written. If they help you, that's great. If you can do better, that's even better.

Then there are exercises - homework - for you to complete.

TIP

Do every exercise and in order.

I've used the principle of 'start from the known and proceed to the unknown'. Now it may be that some sections are dead-easy for you. You may have some playwriting experience already or be bright and catch on to things quickly. Fine. But I still recommend you work through every chapter from beginning to end.

IMAGINE this scene. The theatre is packed and the audience buzzing. You're part of that audience. Your palms are sweating and your stomach has taken up butterfly-collecting. The lights fade, the audience is quiet and the play begins. Your play.

Is that your wish, your dream? Well some wishes are granted and some dreams do come true. So why not yours?

This book has loads of ideas and advice to (a) help you write a play and (b) to then have it performed. Self-believe is a great quality to have.

A *very* brief history and future of live theatre

Now don't think plays are a modern invention or currently face a shaky future. Consider the following.

Television and cinema are everywhere. Billions of people watch TV or go to the movies. But thousands of years before Hollywood and millennia before The Simpsons and digital entertainment, people went to the theatre. Live theatre.

Comparisons are smelly but in many countries, Australia for one, more people go to the theatre than to the football and Aussies love their football.

Live theatre is a universal activity for humans of all ages.

What's special about live theatre?

I can't imagine a novelist who doesn't love reading and especially novels. Likewise I can't imagine a playwright who doesn't love going to the theatre.

Live theatre performances are unique. Every performance is created right before your eyes. That's part of the magic; a big part. Live theatre has enormous appeal to those who love performing, watching and writing.

And the basic ingredients for live theatre have never changed. You need an audience, actors, a space and yes, a script. Sure you can have ad lib theatre – theatre sports is one variety – but the vast majority of plays need and use a script.

In at least one way, the script of the play is exactly the same as a novel, poem, screenplay, article and short-story – it must be good.

Anyone can write a script. But that's not enough. You need to write a cracking script, one which will challenge performers and entertain audiences. Don't write a script, write a fantastic script.

You might think if you get top professional performers, that these actors will make your script a winner. Wrong! The script is the foundation. And with a lousy foundation the whole building collapses. All the king's horses and all the king's men cannot put Scripty together again.

No, it works like this. First you write the wonderful script and second, the actors, director and others turn your words into a fabulous play.

So let's get started and please, do me a favour. Read this entire book right to the end without skipping any pages and do each exercise as you go. You could even re-do each exercise.

Some playwrights are very successful. They also work damn hard. As Fred Astaire said, "The harder I work, the luckier I get". Get lucky.

Prerequisites

But before we proceed, please realise that you must have two essential items - enthusiasm and perseverance.

Some say you shouldn't be a writer if you want to be a writer. Rather you become a writer because you have to write; you have a burning desire to create stories. But even those with in-built enthusiasm can give up. And that, in any genre of writing, is a definite no-no.

Winston Churchill once addressed the students at his boyhood school and gave them three pieces of advice. 1. Never give up. 2. Never give up. 3. Never give up.

You can abandon one, even two of those pieces of advice but you must always hang on to at least one. If you stick with just one of those tips, you'll be successful.

So, with your powerful desire (enthusiasm) to write and your determination to keep going (perseverance), let's get cracking.

Chapter 1 - The Basic Rules

Best work only

LET ME BE frank from the off. It's a waste of time and money if I help you create a script unless the script is your best work. Remember the saying.

It's easy to write a play; it's writing a good one that can be tricky.

Playwrights can fall into the trap of 'The script will get fixed by the actors'. Wrong. The script will be rejected and never reach the actors, or the script will be savaged by the actors or worse, far worse, the script will go ahead and become a lousy play.

Re-write may well become thy middle name. Get the script right first. You know if you've done all you can to write a cracking script. Always produce your best work.

Dive In and Get Wet

It's the same advice for all writing. Let's say you want to write for a certain magazine. Question. What's the first thing you do? Answer. Read several editions of that magazine. You want to write romance fiction. What's the first step? Get the guidelines from the publisher and then read several of their titles.

It's exactly the same with writing scripts. What's the first step? Read lots of them. Your local library, bookshop and web pages are excellent sources for finding plays to read.

Then go to the theatre. And not just one play or one style of play or one type of performance. Theatre is everywhere and there are many types of plays. Go and see them. Professional theatres abound in large cities and touring companies visit regional areas. Go and see shows.

"But I don't like opera." Go and see everything. "But I only want to write children's plays." Go and see everything.

Amateur theatre is everywhere. If ticket prices for professional shows are out of your price-range, go to community or non-professional shows. There are thousands of companies. They perform in the suburbs and country towns. Go and see shows.

You can also watch plays on film. Many plays, operas and musicals are available on video and DVD and online. But understand this distinction.

There's a big difference between a play script being turned into a film script with the play becoming a movie AND a play being performed in a theatre where a camera unobtrusively films the live performance of the play.

But even if you are watching a filmed version of a live play, there is no substitute for being there.

There's no substitute for the smell of the theatre, the buzz of the audience and the knowledge that, what is happening on stage is history in the making. It's live.

Watching plays which have been filmed is fine, good even, as it increases the number and variety of shows you can see. But there is no substitute for putting your posterior on a seat in the stalls or circle and watching living actors do their thing.

Summary

Copy plays. Not as in 'copyright infringement' copy but simply write them out, transcribe them - to educate yourself.

It's said Bach copied Vivaldi and other composers' scores by candlelight in the wee small hours. It's a great way to learn the basics and to get a feel for the flow of the words. Hopefully some of the genius of the great playwrights rubs off on your good self. Transcribe great plays and get intimate with the dialogue and process. If nothing else you'll see where stage directions appear and get the layout of a script.

Read plays. They are sold in many bookshops. Most public libraries have a wide selection of plays. You could join a drama association.

The internet has a huge number of plays you can download. Many playwrights have their work on-line. Read, read and read plays.

Perform plays. Local theatre companies are everywhere. Be an actor or work behind the scenes. Joining a theatre company may prove hugely important as your playwriting career develops. Remember you are looking for places where your plays can be performed once you have written them.

Listen to Everyone

As you write scripts, you'll want and need advice. Here's a great tip. Listen to everyone.

Some people warn against listening to friends and family. They won't give critical advice. They care about you and will flatter you or be reluctant to be critical. Perhaps, but I say listen to everyone.

Listen to actors and directors; listen to people who go to the theatre and to people who don't go to the theatre. Listen to everyone.

You need feedback, it's part of the writing process. I've had great comments from people not experienced in theatre or writing. And naturally I've had some pretty caustic comments too. Quite a few. We'll discuss criticism in more detail later.

Of course experienced writers, actors and directors are a terrific source. And as with all forms of writing, you want people who will give you an honest and constructive opinion.

TIP

Beware of people who feel they have to criticise because to not do so means they lose face. Some critics feel obliged to find fault.

But listening to everyone is just the beginning. Now you must decide what you accept and how you will deal with this information. See, it's not all beer and skittles.

Listen to Yourself

Beginner playwrights may not understand or appreciate this fact but it's true. All writers are vulnerable. They put their work out in the marketplace and may cop a hammering. And sometimes the most hurtful criticism is silence. Your work is ignored. Even experienced playwrights are not immune.

Your best friend is yourself. In the end, you must decide what to write and what to cut. You are the final judge. Never forget you decide how the play will be written.

Just because someone, everyone, says otherwise and experienced people at that, it doesn't mean you are not important. You are not just important. You are vitally important.

"Oh but so-an-so said I should change the ending." And so-and-so may be right. But what do you think? Always listen to yourself. Hey! Who's writing this play, anyway?

Be Organized

Not necessarily tidy or meticulous but organized. Mind you, tidy is good.

Play writing is like all other forms of writing. You get ideas at odd times and from many sources. You're working on one play and thinking about another. You need to revise a play you finished last month.

Not being able to find what you noted for future reference is frustrating. Not being able to find your current play is frustrating even lunacy.

And a frustrated playwright is not being creative. You're wasting time. Time is money. Looking for that piece of paper with those witty lines you penned yesterday means the day is gone and maybe, with it your chance to have your show on this year.

Flying into a rage may be bad for your health and it's definitely bad for your writing.

I guess you have a computer. If so, make sure you know how to save and store files. Label everything. Always back-up your work. Did you note that?

Always back-up your work on a floppy disk or CD or data storage unit. I use one of those tiny memory sticks. They are easy to lose but they hold tons of data and you can carry them anywhere if you're writing off-site. Attach them on a chain around your neck under your clothes.

I like to have a hard copy (I mean a printed-on-paper copy) as well. I find it easier to read. Keep the back-up material somewhere safe and in a different place. If the back-up disks are beside your computer, the burglar or fire may consume the lot.

Computers are brilliant for writers but I still use paper for some things.

Have paper folders for printed and handwritten work. I re-cycle large A4 and A3 envelopes. Label clearly. Store well and sensibly. A disorganized writer is not producing their best work. No, let's put a positive spin on that. An organized writer has a lot going for them.

You're in a productive mood. The words are flowing. You want item X. You find it easily and the flow continues. Be organized.

Forget precious

I don't recommend you say, "I wrote that. My words are sacred. How dare you!"

There is a case for you wanting your words to remain as you wrote them. And it's true some actors and directors will ride roughshod over a script.

Are they right? Are they entitled to do that?

Mmmm. Every case is different and needs to be judged on its merits. But writing a play creates a unique situation.

It's not quite the same as a novelist working with his or her editor but a playwright might be working with a director, a dramaturge (an adapter of plays) and a cast of actors. Oh and if you want some stunning sound, scenery and/or lighting effect, you may well be dealing with technicians, designers, carpenters, electricians, dressmakers and more. A playwright may deal with many people.

But whatever the situation, don't be precious. By all means stick to your guns. Be prepared to fight for that word or sentence. But please, don't think your writing is from on high. Don't think something can't be changed just because you wrote it.

Let's look at it another way. A change may turn your play into a hit!

Compromise might well become thy middle name.

Crawl Before You Walk

Okay, enough talk. Let's get writing.

Well, not just yet. First let me explain my not-so-secret method. It's write short.

I plan to use mini plays, very short plays – I call them Pennyweight Plays – in this book, as well as longer scripts.

A Pennyweight Play is a play which takes between two and ten minutes to perform. That's from start to finish.

But why use these plays?

Because a good play is a good play no matter how long it lasts - and because I want you to succeed today and short plays will make many points in a shorter time.

Sure with a very short play you can't have a detailed and complex plot and you can't develop great depth in your characters but there are benefits.

You can learn about structure, you can produce dialogue and stage directions and you can finish the jolly thing! How many unfinished scripts exist today?

Let's say I give you a play-writing exercise and ask you to write a 90 minute play.

You slave away for weeks or even months.

You might get bogged down and become frustrated. You might give up. Of course you might produce a stunning script and make my best efforts look insipid.

But I want to make sure you taste success and as soon as possible. I don't want you to die before you become a famous and highly-respected playwright!

So, short shows shall succeed. Hey, that's hard to say.

Now, please read the following play. It comes from a story told by my great uncle Billy Williams who sailed from Wales to Australia in 1905, joined the AIF in WW1 and was killed at Gallipoli, Turkey in the Great War. Someone said WW1 was the war to end all wars. They got that wrong.

TIP

True stories often make great plays.

GUARD DUTY

© Cenarth Fox 1992

Published in *Drama Skits 'n Tips* by Cenarth Fox

(A soldier stands on guard duty outside an army barracks. It is night and lighting is dim. The soldier can just be seen. A soldier or soldiers are singing a Scottish song offstage. They enter still singing. They are happy after a night on the town. The guard calls)

Guard

Halt! Who goes there? *(The soldiers stop)*

Soldier 1

(Scottish accent) We are the Scots Guards.

Guard

(Lowers rifle) Very good. Pass by Scots Guards.

(Soldiers exit to enter barracks. Guard resumes duty. Pause. Another group of soldiers is heard offstage singing an English song. They enter)

Guard

(Challenges them) Halt! Who goes there? *(Soldiers stop)*

Soldier 2

(English accent) We are His Majesty's Royal Grenadiers.

Guard

(Lowers rifle) Very good. Pass by Royal Grenadiers.

(Soldiers exit to enter barracks. Guard resumes duty. Another group of soldiers is heard. They enter singing an Irish song)

Guard

(Challenges them) Halt! Who goes there? *(The soldiers stop)*

Soldier 3

(Irish accent) We are the Irish Artillery.

Guard

(Lowers rifle) Very good. Pass by Irish Artillery.

(Soldiers exit. Guard resumes duty. Pause. Another group of soldiers is heard. They enter singing an Australian song possibly 'Waltzing Matilda')

Guard

(Challenges them) Halt! Who goes there? *(The soldiers stop)*

Soldier 4

(Australian accent) Mind y'own flamin' business!

Guard

*(Resigned to this behaviour) I might have known. Pass by Australians!
(Soldiers enter barracks singing 'Waltzing Matilda' or whatever.
Guard shakes his head in disbelief and resumes duty. Curtain/Lights
down)*

The End

This mini play comes from the book *Drama Skits 'n Tips* which is a collection of drama games and mini plays and is part of the Performance Pack of five books in the Performing Arts Pack. All five books are available from Amazon and Fox Plays.

<http://www.labyrinth.net.au/~foxplays/Books.html>

NOW, what have we got here? It's a very short play; probably more of a skit really.

Yes but it has a plot, dialogue and action and a beginning and an end. It has character ID, dialogue and stage directions. Hey that sounds like a play.

It has some drama and comedy. Well, okay, the tag is maybe not funny at all or at least not funny to someone who doesn't understand national humour but I think we can call it a play.

I've seen *Guard Duty* performed many times when I run drama workshops and it's always a hoot. The accents can be hilarious as is the ad lib singing.

And this script, *Guard Duty*, illustrates one important aspect of writing plays - KISS.

Keep It Simple, Stupid.

Let's become good at writing short, simple plays and build from there. Let's develop a simple plot, write the few lines of dialogue to tell the story and wrap it up with a neat conclusion.

Let's crawl before we walk.

So, now it's your turn to write instead of read.

PLAYWRIGHT EXERCISE

I believe rote learning (which here means copying) does have benefits. And yes I'd like you to write out *Guard Duty*. All of it. And by 'write' I mean write. Printing is fine but it must be by hand. No typing allowed.

With a pen or pencil (remember those things?) on a pad and not an iPad, copy the play – that's the heading, copyright stuff, name of characters, stage directions and of course the dialogue. Off you go; it should only take a few minutes, max.

I'm making a cup of tea now as you do some work. You can skip the exercise if you like but I reckon you'll benefit greatly if you do it.

Trust me; simple rote-learning does have its benefits.

Finished copying? Good. Now I want you to become a playwright. I want you to write the play again. Again? Yes, again. This time you can type it if you like but make some changes. It's like painting by numbers because we'll use *Guard Duty* as a template.

You're not being very imaginative and you'll invent very little.

But let's change the nationality of the soldiers. At the moment my version has Scottish, English and Irish with Australians as the final group. You could choose American, West Indian, South African or Italian. Almost any nationality. If you like, pretend they are United Nations peacekeepers on a mission abroad.

But now comes the tricky bit.

At its end, this pennyweight play has a punch line or what some call a tag.

Because the stereotypical Australian is said to lack respect for authority, instead of giving the sentry the correct identification, in *Guard Duty* the Aussies swear (well speak disrespectfully) and tell the silly so-and-so sentry to ‘go jump in the lake’ – or words to that effect.

So in re-writing *Guard Duty*, you’ll need new countries, new regiments and a new punch line.

But which one?

Aha, not so easy after all. The original punch line works if you accept Aussies as knockabout larrikins. So your punch line will only work if the nationality speaking at the end has some well-known characteristic. Some call it a stereotype.

Have a go. You change the response from each soldier who has to say the name of their regiment but you only invent one or two whole new lines of dialogue.

I’ll give you one alternative. Here’s my invention for the new end of the play.

Soldier 4

(United States accent) Ah, go blow it out y’bugle, buddy!

Guard

(Resigned to this behaviour) I might have known. Pass by Yanks!

Don’t only write the tag. Don’t cut corners. Type or write the whole play again. Trust me. Getting the layout or template into your brain is very good training.

If the three main items – character ID, dialogue and stage directions – become second nature to you, your actual play writing will flow or flow better.

So as you create your ‘new’ play, it’s time for me to have another cuppa.

(Pause while student completes exercise and teacher boils kettle)

Success

I reckon it’s hugely important for you to be successful early on.

By making a few simple changes and writing one good tag, you’ve turned the pennyweight play into a snappy short skit. Well done.

And that’s the end of chapter 1. So let’s tackle something different, something new. It’s time to ask yourself, do we laugh or do we cry?
