

SCRIPTWRITING IN DRAMA

One of the most popular individual projects at HSC level is scriptwriting. However, there are several important skills that students must develop if they are to write for the stage in a clear and theatrical way. Students will need some assistance in Years 7–11 if they are to develop their skills adequately to meet the challenge of the scriptwriting course in Year 12. The following guide outlines one approach to assist students in the process.

Understanding the medium

Before scriptwriting can begin students should familiarise themselves with the medium. Students should read a range of scripts particularly recent Australian works.

Looking at scripts

Students can explore how the following features create the drama in the scripts they read:

- conventions
- character lists, stage directions, dialogue, print formatting, author's notes, production notes
- structures
- organisation of the play
- dialogue and images
- the way the verbal and the visual work together to tell a story
- introduction of characters and the way they are revealed including their relationships and their progress through the piece
- dialogue (reflecting the nature of their character)
- stage directions and their contribution to the audience's understanding (A play is not just dialogue.)
- theatrical techniques
- use of different methods to present the action, e.g. symbols, props, rituals and music.

Examples of each of these elements could be collected and included in the logbook to be used later as possible models.

Know your story

When discussing scripts with students ask them to understand and define their story. The main story should be contained in one sentence so, for example:

Two people sit together on a park bench and slowly their relationship develops, then deteriorates.

Developing the idea

When students are developing the idea they should consider:

Who: the characters and their relationships.

What: the key dramatic event (this needs to be central to the action).

Where: the play's setting (the place).

When: the play's setting (the time).

Endings: the play's resolutions, closures or conclusions.

Sequencing

Write a synopsis of the storyline and action in about ten lines.

Break the synopsis into a sequence of events. These may become separate scenes in the play.

Create a framework

Once students have sequenced their action, encourage them to develop their ideas further into a framework outlining the development of their narrative by scene and act, for example:

Act 1 Scene 1

Bill walks into the park dodging a child on a skateboard. He swears and then speaks to the audience about the kind of day he has had.

Students then describe, through a synopsis of each scene, the development of the dramatic action.

This framework will give students a structure before they develop their ideas any further. They should be constantly aware that this structure can be edited and changed as easily as words on a page. At this stage students could break into pairs and discuss their structures.

Having done this they can then proceed to the next stage, developing character and dialogue.

Visualising a performance space

Scriptwriting for theatre requires the writer to visualise the play's action taking place in a performance space. It should be a space that is familiar to the writer and appropriate to the style and requirements of the play.

As the play develops, clear instructions on setting, stage directions and production effects are required. The writer will need to consider the logistics of staging the production.

First draft

Begin writing dialogue for the opening scene (the first event in the sequence). At first it may be

stilted, clichéd and fragmented but as the writing progresses and the action unfolds, a rhythm will develop.

Good dialogue will:

- move the story forward
- communicate information to the audience
- reveal character and relationships
- reveal the emotional states of the characters
- comment on the action.

- details of the performance space envisaged
- author's notes explaining background to the play, particularly if the play is an adaptation or based on a real event.
- bibliography, material and advice used.
- page numbering.

Students may also wish to submit their scripts in competitions like the Young Playwright's Award. Entries for this competition close in August.

Redrafting

Use a process writing approach. Redrafting will occur in conjunction with conferring with friends, family, teachers and advisers. Workshopping scenes and walk-through readings are essential from this point. Each scene should be closely scrutinised and alterations made. The central criterion should be: what does each scene contribute to the play as a whole?

Workshopping the script

This is an essential element in scriptwriting to ensure the play's dramatic qualities are realised through actions and images, rather than through dialogue alone. Workshopping could occur with other students. An audience reaction may be helpful in this process. At some point the play will need to be run in its entirety to ensure that set changes and timing are accounted for within the script.

Formatting and conventions

After a number of redrafts the finer details will have to be polished.

- print format
- character's names
- directions: either in brackets or italics
- acts and scene numbering (if appropriate)
- character list (which may include brief descriptions)
- settings in detail, props, lighting, music and costume

Young Playwrights' Award

The STC and Sydney Morning Herald Young Playwrights' Award is designed to encourage and assist the development of young playwrights. It also aims to complement the teaching of playwriting in the classroom, by providing an opportunity for students to submit their work to a professional theatre company, and to have their work read by theatre professionals.

Two First Prize winners receive a weekend workshop of their script, working with a professional director, dramaturg and actors; a staged reading of their play at The Wharf; a cash prize and ongoing support from the Australian National Playwrights' Centre.

Winners of Merit Awards receive an assessment of their script and ANPC membership. All entrants receive a certificate and general feedback on the years' entries.

Young writers from NSW and the ACT aged 19 years and under are encouraged to enter a one act play under 30 minutes in length. Entries now open for 2002.

For information email: education@sydneytheatre.com.au