

How to Write a Play

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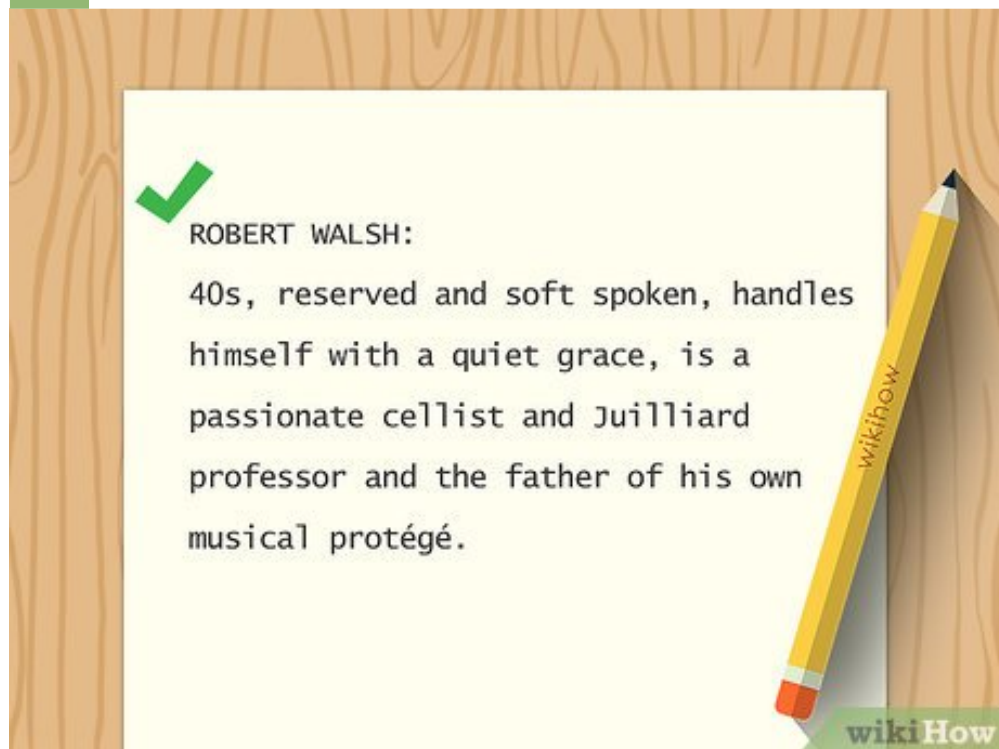
Co-authored by **Melessa Sargent** and **73 contributors**

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A stage play involves drama and action as its most pure actions. All you've got to work with is characters and language. If you want to join the ranks of Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Arthur Miller, you need to develop a bold, character-driven story meant to be performed in a theater. With a good vision, great writing, and a little luck, you'll get to experience the thrill of seeing your finished play performed. Whether you're writing a play to be shown on television or just writing for fun, it's always fun to try.

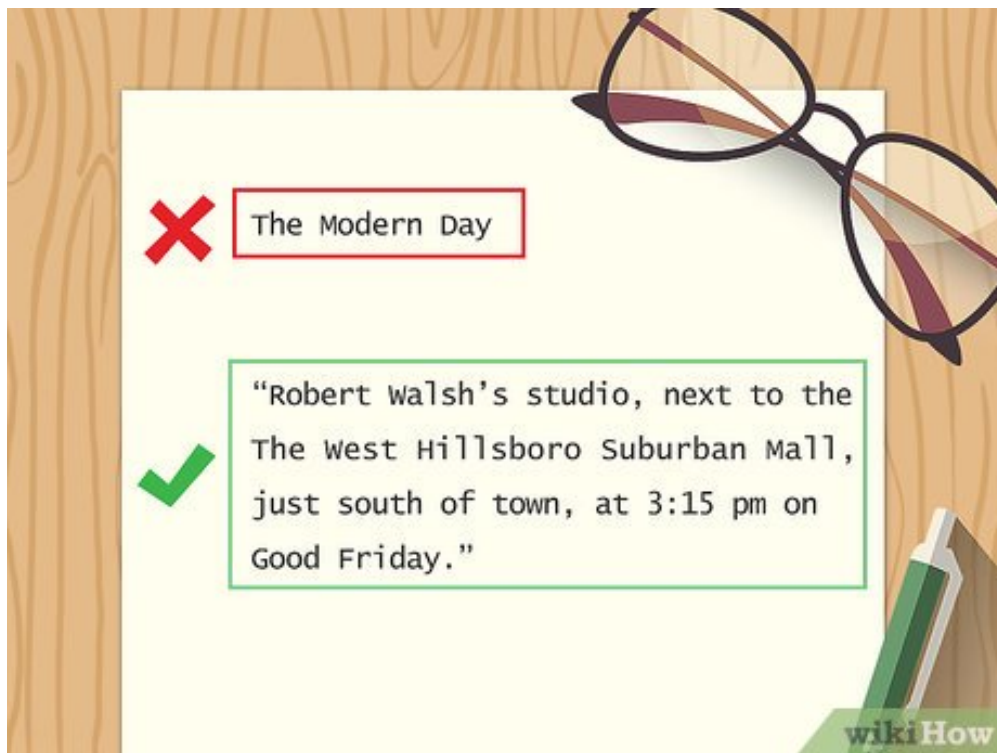
Part
1

Part 1 of 3: Developing Your Story



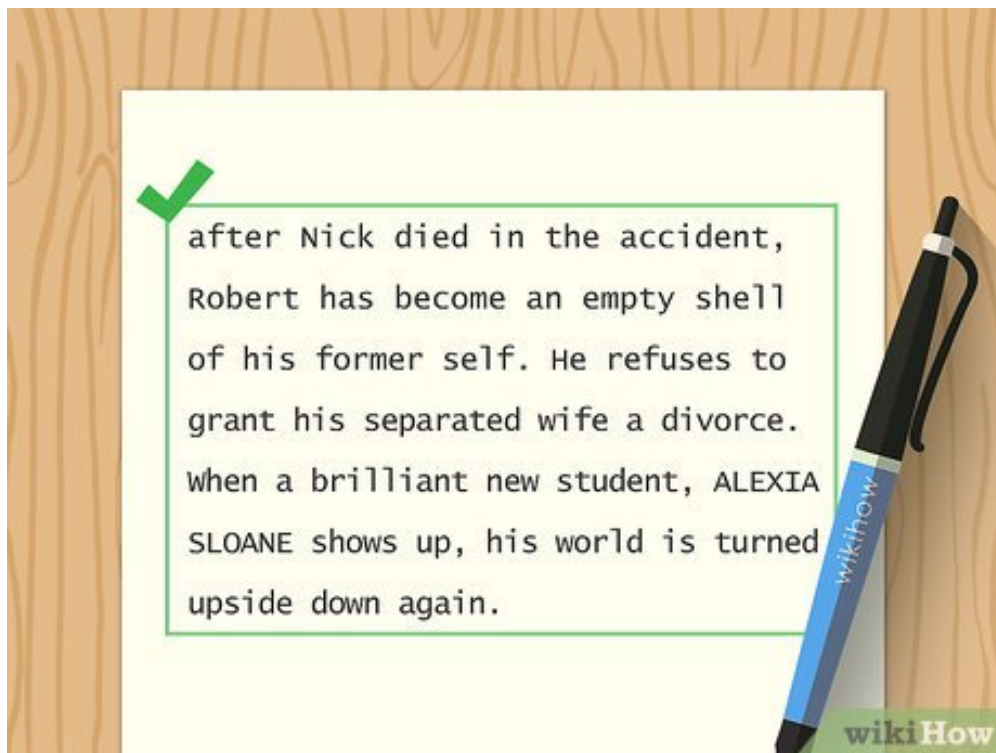
1 Start with characters. Plays are character-driven pieces of writing. Since it's basically going to be a lot of talking between people, your characters need to be as believable as possible. In great plays, the inner tensions between characters enact themselves in external ways. In other words, the characters need to have problems that show up in their behaviour.^[1]

- What does your character want? What is keeping your character from getting what they want? What stands in their way?
- Thinking of interesting jobs can be a good way of developing a character. What's the hardest job you can imagine? What's a job you've always been curious about? What kind of person becomes a podiatrist? How does one end up with such a job?
- Don't worry about the name or the physical description of your character. It doesn't tell you anything about a character named Rafe to know that he is 6'4 and has washboard abs and wears t-shirts some of the time. Stick to one notable and telling physical trait. Maybe your character has a scar on their eyebrow from being bitten by a dog, or maybe your character never wears skirts. This reveals something about them and gives them depth.
- Know your character and review everything you have written down so far.^[2]

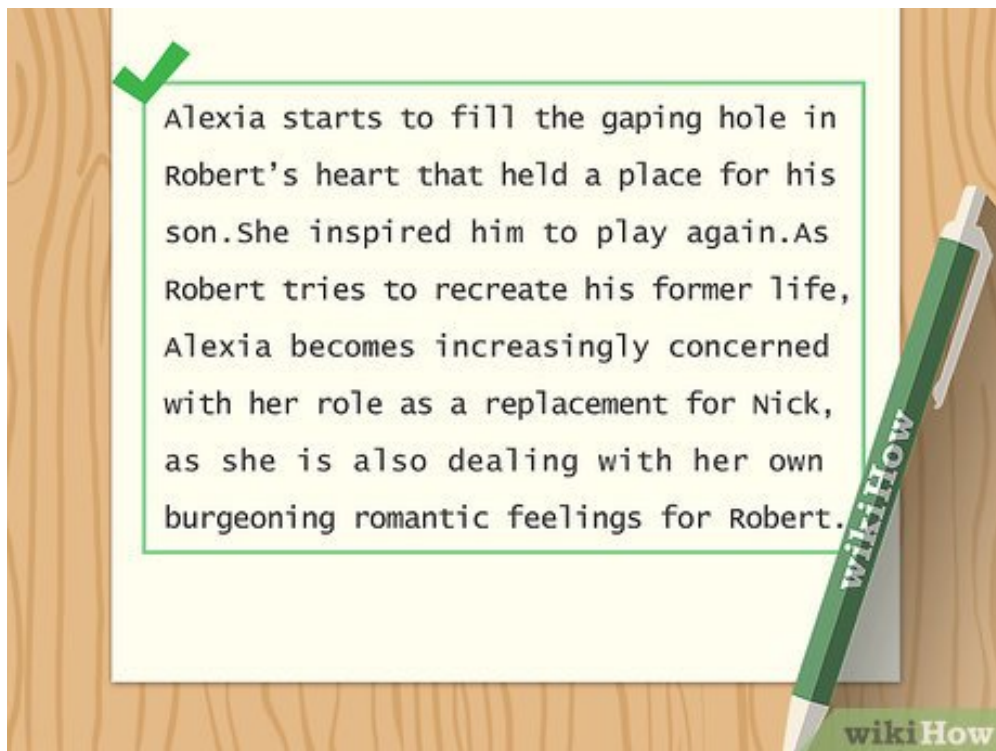


2 Consider the setting. The setting of the play is where and when the story takes place. Placing your character in a tense situation or location is an important way to create drama. Combining character and setting can also be a good way of developing your character, and figuring out what kind of story might result from their placement in that setting. If being a podiatrist is interesting to you, what about being a podiatrist in Paris, Texas? What kind of person becomes a podiatrist in Paris, Texas, for instance? How does one end up there?^[3]

- Be as specific as possible when developing your setting. "The Modern Day" isn't as interesting as "Dr. Wilson's Family Podiatry, next to the The West Hillsboro Suburban Mall, just south of town, at 3:15 pm on Good Friday." The more specific you are, the more you'll give yourself to work with.
- Consider what other characters the setting may introduce. Who works the desk at the podiatry office? If it's a family business, maybe the podiatrist's daughter. Who has an appointment on a Friday? Who's waiting? What are they in for?
- Take into account what would be probable. If you're making a play based on the future, make sure you prepare ideas for how you would stage this futuristic world.
- If your play takes place in the forest, be sure you have enough time and budget to make the forest come alive.
- Be sure to include why the setting is how it is. For example, a tornado passed through the forest and the forest is now a big mess.



- 3 Figure out the inner story.** The "inner" story refers to the psychological conflicts happening within the characters. This is largely hidden throughout the story, but it's important for you to have some sense of as you're writing the play. The inner story will guide the characters throughout their decisions throughout the plot. The more concrete the inner story, the easier the characters will be to write. They'll be making their own decisions.[4]
- Maybe your podiatrist wanted to be a brain surgeon but lacked the stomach for it. Maybe the podiatry program had the least strenuous schedule, and allowed the med-school version of your character to stay up late partying while still passing all their classes. Maybe the podiatrist is deeply unhappy and unfulfilled about having never left Paris.



4 Match the inner story with an outer story. Bad plots look backward and good plots look forward. It wouldn't be interesting to have a play in which your podiatrist talked endlessly about how she'd rather not be a podiatrist and then killed herself with shoe polish. Instead, find a dramatic situation to place your characters in that will test their mettle and change them in some way.[5]

- If it's Good Friday, maybe the podiatrist's retire parents (former podiatrists themselves) are coming for an Easter Dinner. Is your podiatrist even religious? Will she go to Church? Does she have to get home and clean up the house before the weekend starts? Is her father going to make her check out his bunions, AGAIN? Will this be the last straw? What will happen?

If you have plans to actually stage the play keep few things in mind:

- it's a series of conversations between people (it's not a movie)
- focus on the language and the tension between the characters
- make the characters believable

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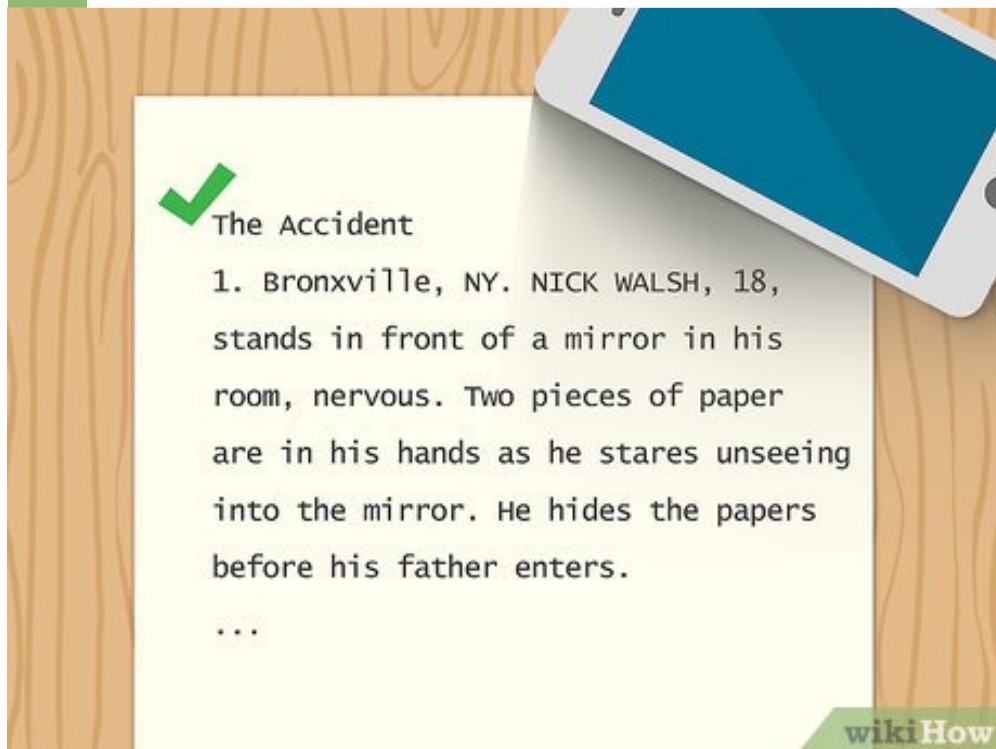
5 Understand the limitations of the stage. Remember: you're not writing a movie. A play is basically an ongoing series of conversations between people. The focus needs to be on the tension between the characters, the language, and on developing your characters into believable people. It isn't a great medium for gun fights and car chases.

- Alternatively, break from traditional theatre and write a play with impossible-to-stage scenes as a way of exploring the writing itself. If you have no plans to actually stage the play, treat it as a different form of **poem**. Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, and Antonin Artaud were all innovators of experimental avant garde plays who incorporated audience participation and other absurdist or surreal elements into their drama.



6 Read some drama and see some productions. Just as you wouldn't try to write a novel if you'd never read one, it's a good idea to get familiar with the world of contemporary theater. Check out plays you've read and liked to see how they transform on the stage. David Mamet, Tony Kushner, and Polly Stenham are all popular and celebrated playwrights.

- It's important to see new plays if you're going to write new plays. Even if you've got a good working knowledge and love of Shakespeare, it's important to get familiar with what's going on in the here and now. You don't live in Shakespeare's era, so it wouldn't make sense to write plays as if you did.



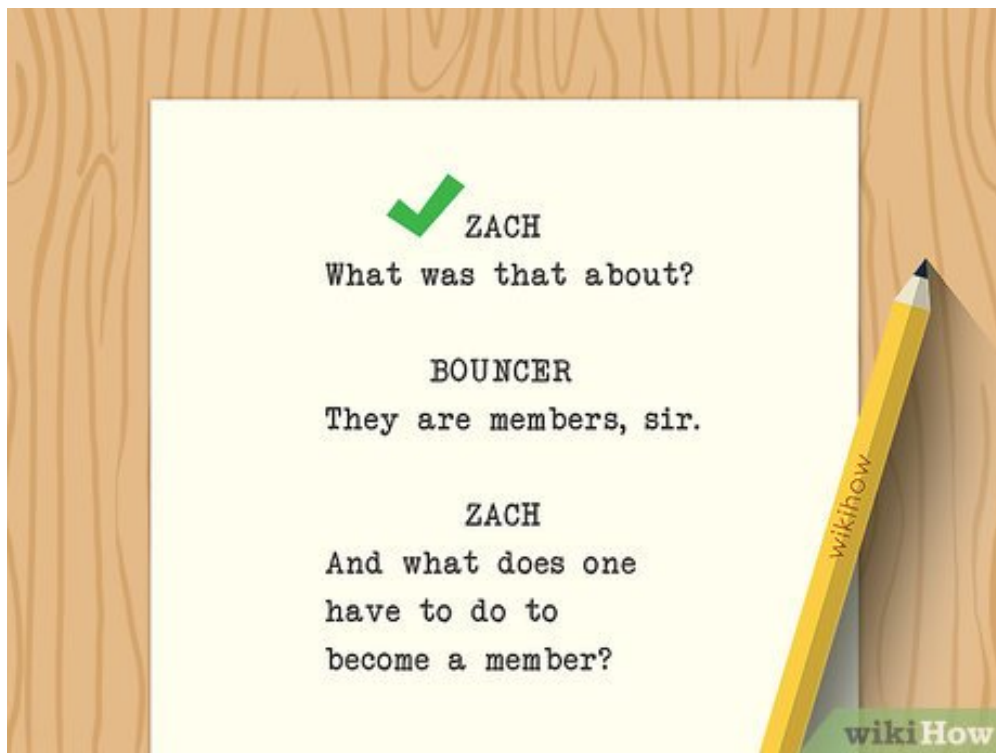
1 Write an exploratory draft. Even if your plan for "Easter with the Podiatrists" seems like you're on your way to claiming a Tony Award, you'll still manage to surprise yourself in the writing. You may have the greatest idea in the world, but you still have to actually write the thing and allow for surprise to enter into the equation. Take your idea or story and roughly write it down, from beginning to the end, this will allow you to know how you want your story to flow^[6]

- In the exploratory draft, don't worry about formatting the play or writing it "correctly," just let everything get out that needs to get out. Write until you've got a beginning, middle, and end to your play.^[7]
- Maybe a new character will wander into the story that changes everything. Let it happen.



3 Always be moving forward. In the early drafts, you'll probably write a lot of scenes that wander without really going anywhere. That's okay. Sometimes you need to have the character spend a long awkward dinner conversation with their brother-in-law to find out something that gives you a whole new perspective on the drama. Great! That means you're writing successfully, but it doesn't necessarily mean the whole dinner date is important to the play.

- Avoid any scenes in which a character is alone. Nothing can happen on stage with a character in the bathroom looking into the mirror.
- Avoid too much preamble. If the podiatrist's parents are going to arrive, don't delay for twenty pages. Make it happen as soon as possible to give yourself more to work with. Make it easy on yourself.



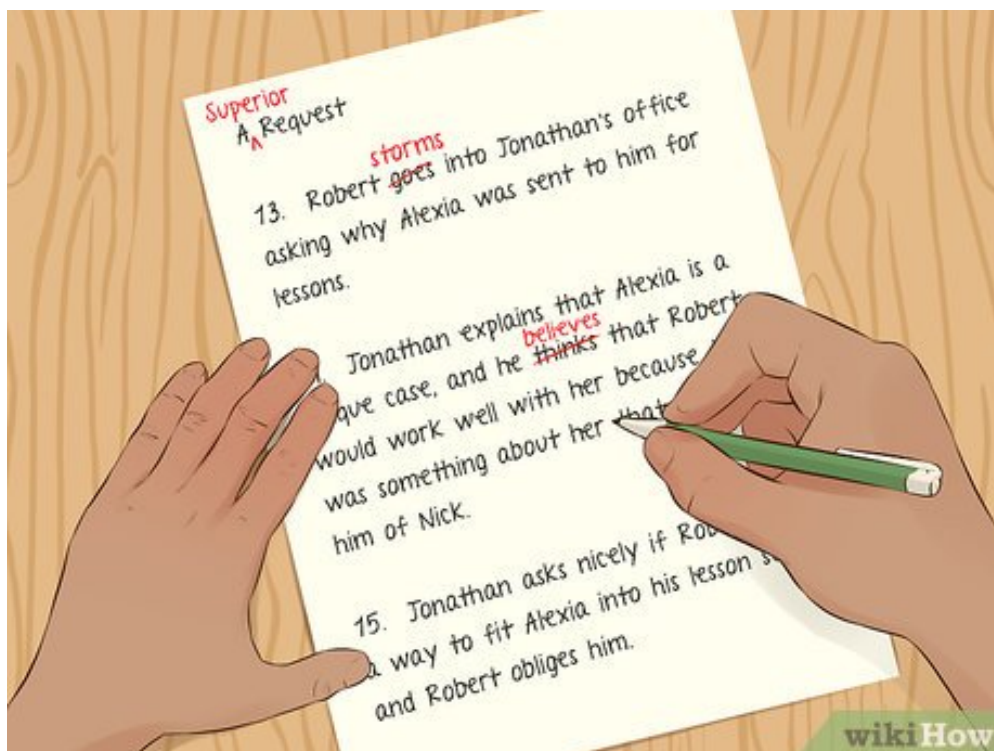
4 Find the characters' voices. Your characters will reveal themselves with their language. The way they choose to say things is maybe even more important than what they're actually saying.^[8]

- When the podiatrist's daughter asks "What's wrong?" the way the podiatrist answers will tell the audience how to interpret the conflict? Maybe she faux-dramatically rolls her eyes and sobs "Everything!" and throws a stack of papers in the air to make her daughter laugh. But we really know there's something wrong she's making light of. We'll look at her character differently than we would if she said, "Nothing. Get back to work."^[9]
- Don't let your characters shout their inner turmoil. A character should never shout, "I'm a shell of a man since my wife left me!" or anything that explicitly reveals their internal conflicts. Make them hold onto their secrets. You want their actions to speak for themselves, and not to force them into explaining themselves to the audience.



5 Revise. The refrain of the writer? "Kill your darlings." You have to be a harsh critic of your early drafts to get the usually-messy early writing crafted into the hard-hitting and realistic drama you want to write. Cut scenes that meander, cut characters that are useless, and make the play as tight and as quick as you possibly can.

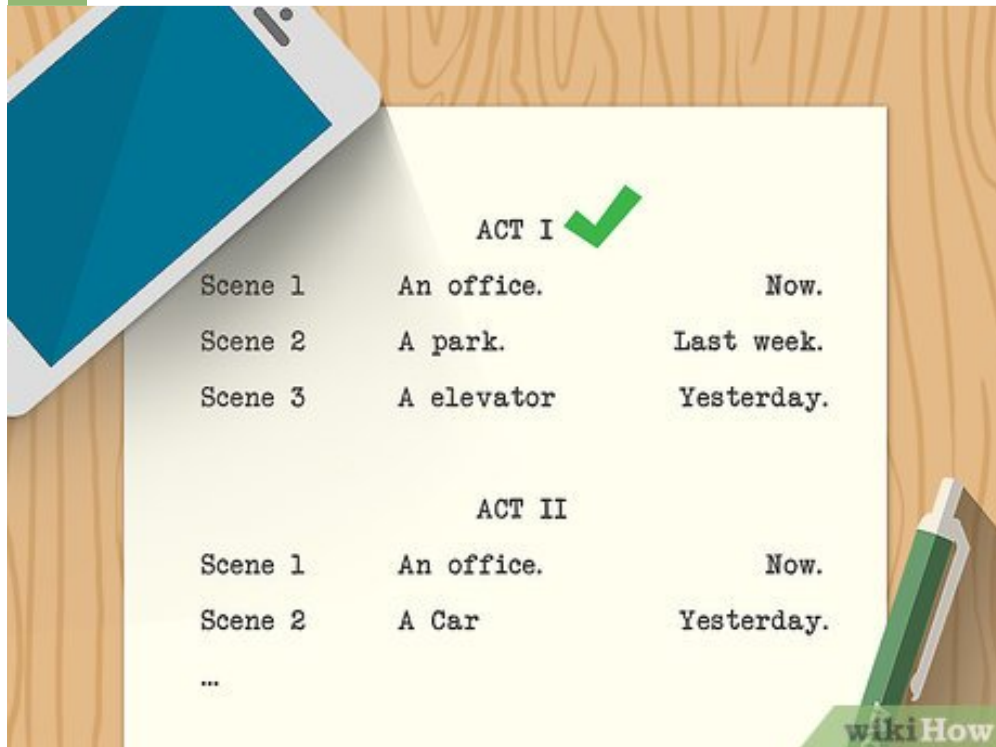
- Go back through your drafts with a pencil and mark any moments with a circle that pause the drama, and underline moments that move the drama forward. Cut out everything that's circled. If you end up cutting out 90% of what you've written, so be it. Fill it back in with things that move the story forward.



6 Write as many drafts as it takes. There's no right number of drafts. Keep going until the play feels finished, until it's satisfying for you to read and fulfills your expectations of the story.

- Save each version of the draft so you can feel free to take risks and always go back to the old version if you want to. Word processor files are small. It's worth it.

Part 3 of 3: Formatting Your Play



1 Break the plot into scenes and acts. An act is a mini-play unto itself, made up of several scenes. The average play involves 3-5 Acts. Generally, a scene will have a given set of characters. If a new character is introduced, or if the character's move elsewhere, that indicates that you're moving on to another scene.

- An act is hard to distinguish. The podiatrist story, for instance, might end its first act with the arrival of the parents and the introduction of the main conflict. The second act might involve the development of that conflict, including scenes in which the parents argue with the podiatrist daughter, Easter dinner is cooked and Church is attended. In Act three, the daughter might reconcile with the father, giving his troubled foot a once-over. The end.
- The more experienced you become at writing plays, you'll be able to think in terms of acts and scenes as you write your initial draft. Don't worry about it in the early-going, though. The formatting is much less important than getting the drama right.

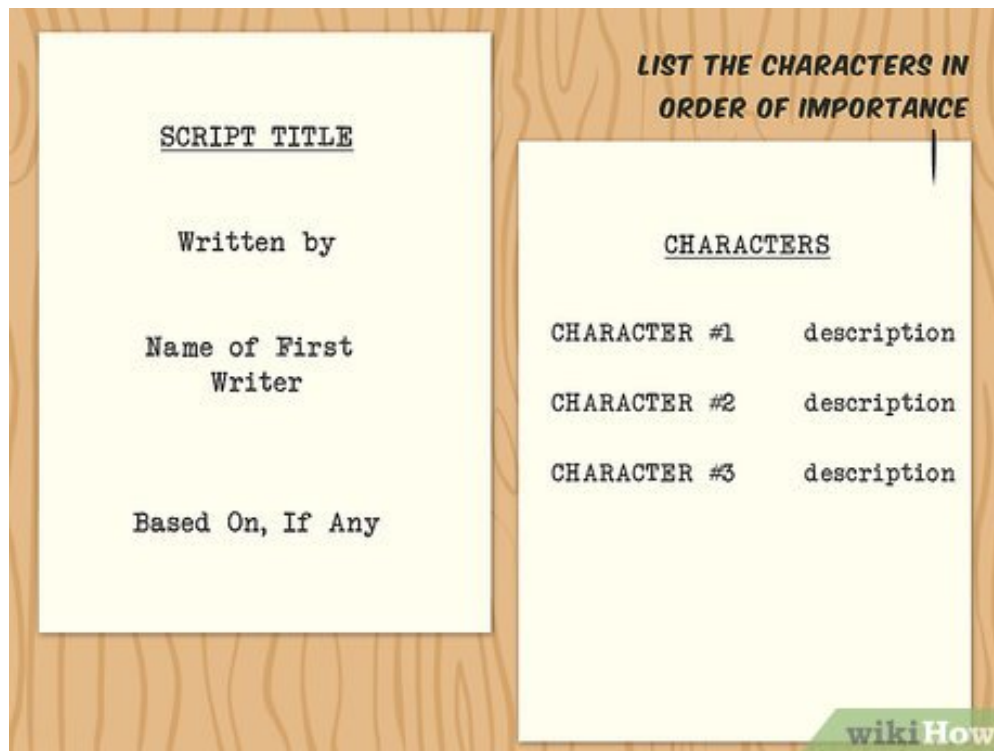


2 Include stage directions. Each scene should start with stage directions, in which you describe briefly the physical components of the stage. Depending on your story, this might be very elaborate or fairly simple. This is your opportunity to influence the way the play will eventually look. If it's important to have a gun on the wall in Act One, put it in there.

- Also include character directions throughout the dialog. The actors will take their own liberties with the dialog and move about as they and the director sees fit, but it helps to have any particularly important (as you see it) physical motions included throughout the dialog. A kiss, for instance, is probably important to direct, but don't overdo it. You don't need to describe every minute physical movement of a character, because the actors will ignore such directions anyway.



3 Tag each character's dialog. In a play, each character's dialog is marked with their name in all capital letters, tabbed in at least 4". Some playwrights will center the dialog, but it's up to you. You don't need to use quotation marks or other distinguishing features, just separate the language by including the character's name every time they speak.



4 Include front-matter. This includes any prologue you'd like to include to the play, a list of characters and a short description of them, any notes you'd like to include about the set up of the stage or other directing guidelines, and possibly a brief summary or outline of the play if you're considering submitting the play to theatre contests.



Expert Q&A

Question

How do you write a superhero script?



Melessa Sargent
Professional Writer
Expert Answer

One of the ways to create a superhero is to have someone do something they never thought of doing without thought to their own safety and well being. The urge to help and assist someone else, in itself is a superhero. Do they need to wear a cape and mask? Well that's up to you, as there are plenty of everyday superhero's that do not wear masks and capes.

Helpful 1 Not Helpful 0

Question

How can I improve my play script?



Melessa Sargent
Professional Writer
Expert Answer

You may want to find a good writing software program. There are ones that are free and ones that cost, make sure to do your research on the programs or you can choose, software programs are not necessary to write and can you choose to write without one. Take your idea or story and write it down, from beginning to the end, this will allow you to know how you want your story to flow. You will need to make sure you know the format for writing a play as you will need to understand the formats for TV's, Features and New Media as they may be a little different regarding acts and scenes.

Helpful 2 Not Helpful 0

Question

What should be cut from a short story?



**KaramellCookie
TV**
Community Answer

Anything that doesn't move the plot forward or reveal part of the personality of a character should be scrapped.

Helpful 34 Not Helpful 3

Question

How do I come up with a good idea for the conflict?



Community Answer

To find a good plot to any story or play, think about what your characters are like. Finding weak points in characters can help uncover what may be easy or a challenge for them. For example, a poor man trying to get around the world will find it much harder than a rich man. Use these flaws to identify the best plots you can for that specific character.

Helpful 40 Not Helpful 8

Question

Is it legal to use product names in my play?



Community Answer

No; that is against trademark laws. You would have to pay if your play ever got published.

Helpful 24 Not Helpful 7

Question

In developing a play, is it best to restrict the number of stage settings (regardless of acts and scenes) to no more than three or four?



TheAnswerMachine
Community Answer

Not necessarily. It ultimately depends on your script and if you feel that it needs more settings. In actually performing, if you're going to be changing scenes a lot, make sure that you have a lot of backstage help available for changing sets.

Helpful 16 Not Helpful 6

Question

How do I write a song?



Community Answer

I would suggest reading through wikiHow's article on [writing songs](#) for some tips.

Helpful 22 Not Helpful 7

Question

How long should a play be?



Community Answer

It can be any length -- one paragraph or 20 pages. Not all plays have to be long to be successful.

Helpful 41 Not Helpful 13

Question

What are stage directors?



Community Answer

Stage directors basically direct the actions: how the characters have to move on the stage.

Helpful 34 Not Helpful 19

Question

How do I create a romantic-tragedy in the style of Shakespeare?



Community Answer

You could read up on some of his works, but don't completely copy any plot line. Just stick to comparable themes and situations.

Helpful 17 Not Helpful 7

[See more answers](#)



Tips

- Don't make characters before you write the show. As you write, you'll know when characters are needed and you'll know what they should need to do.
- Give time in between scenes for scene changes and for actors to get to their places.
- Don't worry about names. You can always change them later.
- If the show isn't a comedy watch the funny things. People get offended faster at shows that aren't comedies. If it is a comedy, you have a much wider range of what you can say. But don't make anything too bad. (ex. no racist jokes, no sexist jokes. No F-Bomb from small children. That only works in movies. Religious jokes sometimes, but some people take those seriously).
- You can write moments when characters come into the house (the house is the audience). This is mostly used for musicals, but if it's needed, don't overdo it.
- Be creative
- Think of the actors/actresses you have on hand before you start, it makes casting so much easier.
- Try to have more than one person audition for a part. If you limit it to only one person acting for a part, you won't have any variety. If they don't fit a certain part, let them audition for another one, or make them a background character.
- You can help figure out a story for it by writing it as you go, like the others said, be creative with it.

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About This Article



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Melessa Sargent

Professional Writer

This article was co-authored by **Melessa Sargent**. Melessa Sargent is the President of Scriptwriters Network, a non-profit organization that brings in entertainment professionals to teach the art and business of script writing for TV, features and new media. The Network serves its members by providing educational programming, developing access and opportunity through alliances with industry professionals, and furthering the cause and quality of writing in the entertainment industry. Under Melessa's leadership, SWN has won numbers awards including the Los Angeles Award from 2014 through 2021, and the Innovation & Excellence award in 2020. This article has been viewed 484,068 times.



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