

Fighting Words
Introduction to Playwriting
Workshop Handbook

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Some Preamble

Hello and welcome.

This is a handbook for a set of six workshops that provide young writers with an introduction to writing for theatre. The workshops run at around 80 - 100 minutes. Rough estimates of running times for each exercise are included. We'll cover character, monologue, dialogue, setting, action, structure, form, and editing. There is a mix of paired and solo writing. The first three workshops cover the basics of playwriting and involve lots of loose, disconnected exercises to get to grips with different concepts and prompt idea generating. The latter three cover some more technical areas and the exercises begin to lead the writers towards developing a short play/scene.

It's important to be clear about expectations for sharing work. Theatre-making is a collaborative art form. We write words which will be picked up by actors and a director, interpreted by technicians and designers, given a shape and form in the physical world and, ultimately, experienced by an audience. So, a key part of the workshops is the sharing of individual and paired writing with the wider group. Signposting in advance which work is personal and not intended to be shared and which work will be read aloud is strongly recommended.

With all that said, participants should only share what they are comfortable sharing. If someone isn't comfortable with sharing their writing, ask if they can share something that happened in the scene, or a bit of detail about one of the characters. It's worth emphasising that all of these other things (story events, character details, ideas, actions) are important parts of storytelling. Writing doesn't start when you sit down at a desk and put pen to paper, it's all of the thinking that you do about the story also.

If someone is reluctant to read, but open to sharing their work, ask if they would be happy for you to read out what they have written. If they're happy to do so, but sharing copybooks isn't possible, see if it is possible for them to take a clear photo of their copybook and send it to you. If participants are using phones/tablets that will be a bit smoother.

Sidebar: When these workshops were conducted sharing copybooks with classmates was not possible. Participants were only ever able to read out their own work. There's a different quality of engagement when hearing your own words spoken aloud by someone else, often revealing insights that would not crop up otherwise. Something to explore under similar circumstances in future, would be a system for rapidly sharing work. Possibly a shared Microsoft Teams or Google Drive folder, where participants upload photos of their work.

This relies on an assumption of access to smart phones/tablets/wi-fi which is not a guarantee. There may well be a more efficient, lo-fi solution I have overlooked. Whichever system is used, it should be introduced at an early stage so that by the time final scenes are being written and read aloud the sharing method is second nature.

It's ideal if writers each have a dedicated copybook for this project. It will become populated with interesting characters, ideas, stories and situations. At times throughout the project, participants can cast back through their copybook and see if, among the pages, anything catches their eye, a line of dialogue or an encounter they would like to develop further.

These workshops were delivered remotely. The limitations of this form meant that it wasn't possible to run through some games I would usually use. If you're doing these workshops in person, even if the young writers are required to stay at their own desks throughout, I highly recommend including some games throughout. They can settle a group, liven them up, signal to them that the kind of work being done within this class is of an entirely different nature. They're also good fun. Time allowing, I like to run through three different types of games in quick succession, usually in the following order:

Something physical to warm up the body.

Something intricate to warm up the brain.

Something creative to warm up the imagination.

Some games that I like, mainly focusing on engaging the imagination, are included in the Games & Exercises section at the very end of the handbook.

Each workshop has a loose list of plays that illustrate the topic being explored. None are essential, and you may choose to use entirely different texts. But if it is possible to include some published scripts, even as reading in between classes, there are several benefits. On a very basic level, it gets young writers familiar with what a script looks like, what kind of shape the words make on the page. A diversity of texts is useful to shake any fixed notions of what a play has to be, and can provoke thoughts about different ways to shape a story. And finally, reading lots of different plays is useful for writers of all ages. It gives a feel for what is possible on stage, what has gone before, and where can we go from there. It should be noted that most of the plays listed feature swear words, and some contain serious themes of abuse, racism, family trauma. It is recommended to read in advance to determine suitability for your group.

I have gathered lots of different exercises together which I came across through the work of other brilliant theatre artists. I have credited them where appropriate and recommend following their work if any appeal to you. A number come from the Bruntwood Prize livestream workshops, available on the Royal Exchange Theatre's Youtube page. Other sources include Stephen Jeffreys' book *Playwriting: Structure, Character, How and What to Write* and the Bush Theatre *Student Guide to Writing: Playwriting*.

WORKSHOP ONE

Introductions/ Writing for the Stage

Plays: *Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play*, Anne Washburn
The Brothers Size, Tarrell Alvin McCraney

Introduction:
(10 minutes)

In this room, we will be talking about plays, reading plays, and (crucially) writing them.

Question: Has anyone been to see a play?

Could be a school play, musical, panto, touring production, amateur dramatic production, schools production of an exam text.

Question: Does anyone have a favourite play? Or a movie, or book, or game, or TV show?
All of them tell a story, in different ways.

Question: How is storytelling for theatre different than it is for film, TV, books etc?

Some thoughts:

- Film, TV, and theatre are all written to be performed
- TV is episodic, Film and theatre are each one contained unit
- Different levels of realism: Theatre is fundamentally unrealistic, because of this the audience engage imaginatively. Movies & TV shows have the burden of being lifelike.
- Theatre is quicker to produce than a movie, and can respond more immediately to current events. Is this a good thing or a bad thing?
- The people making a play and the people watching it are together in the same space
- Theatre happens live, in real-time.
- An audience member can always walk out, a phone could go off, an actor could forget their lines.

Writing: Free-write
(10 minutes)
Not shared

This is a free-writing exercise. There are three prompts, to write on for three minutes each. I generally recommend giving the prompts one at a time. The idea is to write and continue writing for the full three minutes. Whatever occurs to you. If nothing is coming into your head, write about that. And it's not going to be shared, it's just for yourself.

Imagine you are talking to a time-traveller from 250 years in the future.
They speak the same language but know very little else about life today.

1. Tell them about yourself.
2. Tell them about where you live.
3. Tell them about one thing (big or small) that you would change about the world.

So that's a solid 9 minutes of writing, which means we're off to a flying start. And contained within those three chunks of writing is everything necessary to make a play. We've got a character, yourself. We have a setting. And we have a central idea, a provocation. We're going to look at developing each of those components in later workshops, but for now, you've already created the material for a play. Congratulations!

Discussion: Humans and Animals

(15 minutes)

Shared

I came across this discussion topic in an online workshop led by Simon Stephens, a UK playwright, and thought it was a really interesting way of opening a discussion about storytelling.

This is a question with more than one answer. It's a question with no right answer, which really means every answer is the right one.

Question: What is the difference between human beings and other animals?

Ask the writers to spend 2 minutes thinking, and to write down their answer or answers.

Ask the writers to discuss and share their answer with the person next to them. Give them three minutes. As they are discussing, put these further three questions to them:

- Are there any similarities between your answers?
- Are there any major disagreements?
- Can you reach a compromise, one answer you can agree upon that encompasses both of your thoughts? If either of your answers has changed in the discussion that is ok.

Share with the class (5 minutes)

There are lots of different answers to this question. There are very interesting scientific answers to do with the development of our frontal lobes, our opposable thumbs. Here are some that seem significant to me.

- Our understanding of past, present, and future.
- We can imagine what our ancestors were like, speculate what world our descendants will live in
- We get embarrassed
- We know we're going to die.
- We tell stories

Storytelling is something unique to humans. It's something irrepressible about us, occurring in every society, every pocket of humanity. We tell stories all the time.

Question: When was the last time you told a story? Today? Just before class? Has anyone been late to class recently? How did you explain what happened? Did you stretch the truth even slightly to make the circumstances of your lateness more compelling?

Has anyone ever had a vending machine eat their change? Did you complain about it to your friends afterwards? How did you order the elements of the incident? What context did you provide?

This is what we'll be looking at during these workshops.

Why do we tell stories?

How do we tell them?

What story do you want to tell?

Scene: Reading (15 minutes)

For this exercise, I used the first 10 pages of *Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play* by Anne Washburn. The play gets to the heart of the power of storytelling, and follows nicely on from our question about humans and animals. You can select another text, the idea is to start getting familiarity with how a play is laid out and to open up a discussion.

In *Mr. Burns*, a global nuclear catastrophe has taken place and a group of survivors have banded together. To pass the time, and to restore some sense of normality, they sit around a fire and retell an episode of *The Simpsons*.

Question: What pop culture item from today would become retold in a future civilization?

Scene: Formatting
(5 minutes)

I think it's valuable at this point to take a minute with the scene that you have just read and point out how the page is laid out. You can cover this in greater depth in later workshops, but for now what I think is important to emphasise is the following:

Character names on the left

Then a small gap and the dialogue to the right

Stage directions are on a separate line and often in italics

For reasons that will become clear later (it's helpful for an editing exercise) I ask writers to keep a gap between characters' names (if the copybook has a left-hand margin, there is perfect) and dialogue.

Writing:
(10 minutes)
Shared

This exercise is an inversion of the free-writing exercise we began the workshop with. For this, the task is to write from the perspective of the time-traveller. Take a bit of time and have a think about what they're like as a person, where they come from, what makes them angry or afraid or hopeful. Then have them tell us the following, in their own words:

About themselves

About where they live

And about one thing (big or small) they would change about the world

Share:
(10 minutes)

Go around the class and hear from some of the time-travellers the writers have come up with.

WORKSHOP TWO

Character - Monologue - Dialogue

Plays: *A Whistle in the Dark*, Tom Murphy
We Can't Have Monkeys in the House, Ciara Elizabeth Smyth
Boys, Ella Hickson

Writing: Free-write
(6 minutes)

This is a free-writing exercise with three prompts, for two minutes each.

Write about a white elephant and nothing else
Write about anything but a white elephant
Write about anything at all

Character: Discussion
(5 minutes)

Question: Ask the group to think about their favourite or most memorable characters. Who are they? Discuss which characters people in the group have chosen. Ask what made them choose that character.

Some things that appeal to me:

- Exciting dialogue
- Distinct character types
- Complex personalities
- They're proactive
- Consistent without being predictable
- They contain contradictions

How do we learn about characters?
(10 minutes)

What other characters say about them:

E.g. A mob boss. Before the mob boss appears we see two of their cronies. A job has not gone to plan and they're discussing who will break the bad news. The way that discussion plays out will give us an insight into the mob boss. Are the cronies terrified and trying to

shift the blame? Seems like the boss is a pretty nasty piece of work. Or are they totally blasé and unconcerned? Guess the boss is a bit of a pushover.

To extend this example even further, something interesting to play with is a split in the reactions. Is one of the goons an anxious wreck while the other is totally nonchalant? Well. Whether we're dealing with a neurotic catastrophiser or a seriously hard-as-nails individual (or an oblivious idiot) will be decided when we finally meet the boss. This kind of development is interesting for an audience, where new information recontextualizes previous scenes.

What they say/ The way that they say it:

By hearing the way a character speaks, we learn about them and the world they come from. Do they have an accent? What kind of vocabulary do they use? When they speak, is it formally or is it casually, using slang? Do they use jargon? Some key information we can learn includes:

- Background
- Personality type
- Status

What they do:

The actions they take, proactive or reactive. Do they make things happen or do things happen to them? What tactics do they use?

Bonus:

An extra way in which we learn about character is in the gap between those things. Do they say one thing and do another? They're inconsistent, cowardly, or fickle. Do other characters say one thing about them and they do something different? Perhaps they are mysterious, inscrutable, or they have purposefully misled people as to their nature. A villain is much more interesting if they have managed to convince other people they are not. Shakespeare's plays are full of such characters; *Othello's* Iago, Richard III, and Claudius, the usurping King in *Hamlet*.

Exercise: Photo

Paired

(10 minutes)

For this exercise, you will need a set of photographs with people in them. If working digitally around 20 is a good number to provide plenty of choice. If you are using printed photographs, then as many as you can get, ideally more photos than there are groups by a few. Printed means that each group must work on a different photo. I think this is a positive, you will have a wide variety of characters and scenes arising from this.

Some photographers whose work captures interesting looking people in atmospheric locations/situations: William Eggleston, Cor Jaring, Nan Goldin, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Rosie Marks, and Bill Cunningham.

Divide the group into pairs. Ask the pairs to have a look through all of the photos and pick one that interests them. Once they've agreed on and chosen a picture, tell them to take two minutes and absorb all of the details about the photo.

If we want an audience to get to know a character, we have to know them first. Asking questions of a character is a great way to do this.

Give the writers these questions to answer.

1. What's happening in the photo?
2. Where are we?
3. When is it happening? Time period & time of day.
4. Who are the people in the picture?
5. What is their relationship to each other?

6. Who's story is it? (Who is the main character?)
7. Give them a name.
8. How old? Be specific. (What does that mean for what they have lived through?)

9. Where do they live?
10. Who do they live with?
11. How do they make their money?
12. What makes them angry?
13. What frightens them?
14. What makes them sad?
15. What makes them happy?
16. What do they want most in the world?
17. What's preventing them from getting this?
18. What do they need most in the world? (They might not be aware)
19. What's at stake? (What will they win or lose if they get it or don't get it?)

Tell the writers to spend a bit longer on these next three questions. Ask them if they can form a small story through these three events.

20. What happened just before the picture?
21. What is going on during the picture?
22. What happened just after?

Writing: Character Monologue
(10 minutes)
Individual work
Shared

A monologue is a part of a play where one character speaks, uninterrupted, for a span of time. They could be expressing a certain idea, giving a speech, delivering a eulogy or perhaps they have just bottled up all the things they need to say and now it's all coming out.

Ask the participants to write a monologue for their photo character. Have the character tell us in their own words what part they played in the Before, During, and After events. At the end of the monologue, have the character reveal a secret.

Some points to consider include:

Think about how they speak.

What vocabulary do they use?

The length of their sentences

What is the rhythm of their speech?

Share:
(10 minutes)

Ask to hear some of the monologues.

If there is any reluctance to share the monologue itself, that's totally ok.

Ask the writer to talk you through the Before, During, and After events they came up with.

Scene: Reading
(10 minutes)

For this exercise, I used the first 7 pages of *Boys* by Ella Hickson. Three characters are introduced in quick succession. Each character has a very distinct personality and we get to know them very rapidly: through what they say, what they do, what other characters say about them, and the gap between all of these things. The extract contains swearing and drug use.

Choose a scene to read, and assign participants to read out each character and the stage directions. Before starting, ask the group to consider the following:

Question:

- What do we learn about the characters through their dialogue?
- What do we learn about the characters through what they do? (Hint: Look to the stage directions for this)

Discuss the answers to each question after you have read through the scene.

Writing: Out of Character

(15 minutes)

Individual work

Shared

Write a scene with your photo character and one other character (this other character could be in the original photo or they could be someone totally new).

- Character A has done something wildly out of character.
- Character B is asking Character A to explain themselves.
- At some point during the scene, Character A's monologue secret is revealed.
- What does this change?

Share:

(10 minutes)

Ask to hear the scenes. If there's any reluctance to share, see if the writer would be happy to share what was the out-of-character thing their character did, or the secret that their character had. Encouraging writers to share these elements provides a way in to discussing their writing which may encourage them to share more of their work during later workshops.

WORKSHOP THREE

Time & Place

Plays: X, Alistair McDowall

The Weir, Conor McPherson

Writing: Free-write

(6 minutes)

Write for two minutes for each of the prompts below. The only rule is that in each section every sentence starts with the same two words, from there whatever comes into your mind.

As ever, the writing is not shared and the idea is to write to fill the three minutes. If nothing is coming to you, write that.

Every sentence starts with:

I remember _____

I notice _____

I imagine _____

Introduction: Setting

(5 minutes)

On a basic level setting is about making a world for your characters to inhabit and for your audience to experience/ explore. You can have plays that take place in multiple locations, over several different years. And you can have plays that take place in one location, which run in real-time. You can have disrupted time - where scenes move backwards in time or jump all over the place. And you can have simultaneous location - where characters speak from different locations, interweaving throughout a scene.

The next step is about creating a setting that plays an active role in the drama. This sounds like I'm referring to a talking couch. I'm not. But if that's the scene that someone wants to write, then brill.

As an example of an active, dramatic setting, you could have a scene where a couple are deciding whether or not they will stay together. One of them has been offered a dream job in a faraway city. Writing that conversation at the train station is a way of creating a setting that can add dramatic pressure to the narrative. The platform can be bustling or deserted. There's luggage to handle, tickets to check, inspectors to contend with. It's in public, which

changes the kinds of things they may feel comfortable saying or doing. Crucially, the train is arriving in 4 minutes. A large clock in the background counts down the seconds they still have together.

Discussion: Scene Locations
(5 minutes)

Give the group one minute to think up and write down as many locations for scenes that they can think of. Emphasise the need for dramatically active locations.

After the minute is up, ask to hear what everyone has come up with. Write the suggestions up on the board.

Discussion: Play Openings
(15 minutes)

For this exercise, you will need the opening page(s) of three different play scripts. What we need is the stage directions that describe the location, without any of the stage directions that mention characters on stage. Some creative cropping may be required.

Some contrasting plays include; *The Weir*, Conor McPherson; *X*, Alistair McDowall; *Blasted*, Sarah Kane; *The Children*, Lucy Kirkwood; *Beginning*, David Eldridge.

Circulate the stage directions and read through them together. Put the group into pairs. Ask the pairs to come up with characters that could occupy each space. Ask for a name, an age, and a bit of bio. Give them a few minutes.

When they have done this, tell them how many characters are in each of the plays. Tell them they need to have the same amount. This may mean that they need to cut or come up with some more.

Discuss as a group the different characters each pair came up with for the three locations.

Exercise: Character Location
(10 minutes)
Paired

With the group in pairs, ask the writers to choose a location. It can be from the list on the board or they can go with something totally different. Ask them to write a few lines of stage directions to describe the location. Give them five minutes for this part.

Next ask them to come up with three characters who could occupy this location.

- One who is comfortable there (but it's not their home)
- One who is there for the first time
- One who is there for the first time in several years

Give them a name, an age, and a short bio. Give the pairs five minutes for this part also.

Writing: Write a scene
(10 minutes)
Paired

Now that we have a location and we've created characters for it, we're going to write a scene drawing on all of this.

Ask the pairs to choose two of the three characters from that location. They can choose what pairing they want to write with. Then they are going to write a scene using the following formula:

A is sitting down.

B walks in.

A stands.

One of them tells the other to leave the room/location.

Share:
(10 minutes)

Go around the group, and hear the scenes that have been written.

Exercise: Location Questions
(5 minutes)

Once we have our location, there are certain questions we can ask to further develop our sense of place. Ask the writers to go through each question for their location for the scene.

What time of day is it?

What is the weather like?

Is this place safe or unsafe? For whom?

Is it urban, suburban or rural?

Is it public or private?

Question: Do any of the answers change or reveal anything about the scene?

Whether the location is public or private is very important to know. Different narrative events are possible depending on whether the location is public or private. For example, a character coincidentally bumping into someone they know, who provides them with essential information. Very unnatural if the scene is taking place within the character's apartment, more excusable if the scene is happening at a bar.

Writing: Senses, Part One
(10 minutes, including giving instruction)
Shared (Flag ahead of time)

This is an exercise that I got from an online workshop by Bryony Lavery, a British playwright. I've modified the final prompt a bit but all credit goes to her. If time is short, you can do Part One of this exercise in place of the free-writing exercise that starts the workshop.

Give participants a number from 1 - 5. Ask them to write their number down at the top of their page.

They are going to write a journey of their day from the moment they woke up until they arrived in class. The journey is a list of one-word bullet points. The twist is that they are to only use the sense that is assigned to them based on their number.

1. Sight
2. Touch
3. Smell
4. Hearing
5. Taste

So if your sense is hearing, write every sound you heard from the start of your day up until you walked into class. Emphasise that the journey is in short bullet points, so they should state the thing that has been sensed rather than describe it.

So, as an example: Ceiling → Hand → Duvet → Legs → Feet → Floor

Rather than: Bedroom ceiling, replete with cobwebs and cracking paint → A hand, the nails painted a charming sunflower yellow → Duvet, thrown back, still warm etc. etc.

Just to note: There can be a certain amount of personal information within these journeys so I think it is worth flagging that the lists will be shared afterwards. This just reminds writers not to put in anything they wouldn't feel comfortable reading out.

Give the group 5 minutes to write.

Share:
(5 minutes)

Here, I think it's positive to share what has been written.

Ask the participants who are listening to reflect on what we learn about the world of each journey. The same location questions from earlier can be asked again.

Writing: Senses, Part Two
(15 minutes, including giving instruction)
Shared

Great. So we're going to apply this exercise to a scenario. First off, check to be sure that everyone remembers their number, as we'll mix up the senses again. The new sense numbers are:

1. Smell
2. Hearing
3. Sight
4. Taste
5. Touch

So, for this exercise you will give the writers a scenario. And they're going to describe the situation using only the sense that they've been given. Unlike the previous exercise, they can use more than one word. Here is the scenario that I have used, but feel free to tinker and change as you see fit:

Scenario: "You're in the centre of a capital city. You're in the back-office of a busy bank. It is a hot afternoon at the end of May. A group of people are going to break in and successfully rob the bank."

You're going to give the group the first line, and from there they describe what happens.

The first line: "This is what I smelled/heard/saw/tasted/touched"
Whichever of those is the sense they have been given.

Give the group 10 minutes to write.

Share:
(10 minutes)

Put the writers into groups of five, with one of each sense represented.

Ask each group to read out each of their pieces.

Mix up the order in which they're read out each time.

The events are predetermined, so each piece should cohere more or less, but the details of each sense are wildly different and, usually, very vivid.

Question: What effect does the different order have on the experience?

The group are halfway through the set of six workshops.

It feels fitting to have some form of short performance, which is what this is. A quintet of senses. It's also useful to signal the possibilities of writing for theatre. This is an example of a non-traditional writing technique being used to tell a story. Stories can be told as fragmented lists of senses just as much as they can be expressed through characters talking back and forth. Emphasise to the group that their stories can be expressed in whichever shape they wish.

In the latter half of the workshops, the writers will begin to work on one single piece more consistently. The exercises that are assigned can be used to add extra elements to these developing scenes. Some of the exercises might not suit the scene. If so, no bother. Give it a go with some other set of characters, some other situation.

WORKSHOP FOUR

Dramatic Action

Plays: *Far Away*, Caryl Churchill

Free-write:

(6 minutes)

This free-writing exercise has three prompts, for two minutes each. They are as follows:

What do you want by the end of the day? One thing stopping you.

What do you want within the next year? One thing stopping you.

What do you want before you die? One thing stopping you.

Tell the participants to try as much as possible to stick to clear, actionable goals.

So, for example. Something you want by the end of the day. A cup of tea is preferable to a newfound sense of enlightenment. Tea is tangible, enlightenment is a bit ineffable. One thing stopping you? There's no milk. Note, it doesn't have to be an object or something you can hold in your hands. It could be wanting to finish a level in a game you're playing. Something that could stop you? The power goes out.

As the prompts move further into the future it can be difficult to keep things clear and actionable. For what you want before you die, especially. It's natural to start to get existential at that point but instruct the writers to try as best as they can to keep it a clear goal that can be achieved. For example, someone visiting a specific country they've always wanted to go to. Something that could stop that? Fear of flights, funds, collapse of air travel, closed borders. Starting to sound a bit grim, let's move on!

Introduction: Dramatic Action

(5 minutes)

This workshop is about dramatic action.

Specifically, three elements that I think of as some sort of a narrative perpetual energy machine: Objectives, Obstacles, Tactics.

Objectives.

What a character wants.

A character can have lots of objectives within a play. Their main want (their greatest wish) is called their super objective. Then the steps along the way each have their own mini-objectives.

For example, a character who wants to become a famous musician (super-objective) may along the way want to write a song, then want to play a gig, then want to record a demo, then want to release an album.

Obstacles.

What is stopping the character from getting what they want. This can be a character, or a situation. It's generally useful to have this be represented by a character, someone with power over whether the main character can get what they want or not.

This is a general rule. And you may find that it doesn't work for or even runs counter to the play that you are writing. If your main character wants to stop the climate crisis, then creating a character with individual power over whether that happens or not is a political decision, and one that might not sit right with your values as a writer.

Tactics.

What ways does the character try to get what they want.

Are they polite, charming, threatening, conniving?

One character can use several tactics over the course of one scene.

If something isn't working, they adjust, try something else.

I see these three elements as the engine of dramatic storytelling. All storytelling, really. They tend function something like this:

A character wants something.

Something is stopping them.

They try a way to overcome what is stopping them.

It doesn't work SO they try something else.

Or it does work BUT it has an unintended consequence.

The unintended consequence leads to another obstacle of a different quality.

Different tactics are required.

The obstacles increase in severity

The tactics increase in ingenuity

Until finally it does or it doesn't work AND that is the end.

Writing: Objectives Scene
(10 minutes)
Individual work

Write a scene with two characters, A & B
Choose a location

Character A wants to borrow something from Character B.
Character B has an important meeting coming up.

Take a minute or two to think about the two unknown elements: what does Character A need to borrow, and what is the significance of Character B's upcoming meeting. Then write the scene between them. How do the two characters' wants/needs intersect?

Discussion: Objectives + Tactics
(10 minutes)
Group Discussion

For this exercise, if appropriate, you can bring in a box of sweets. Alternatively, a pack of pencils. Whichever it is, on the whiteboard write the following in large letters:

Objective: Get this _____.

Fill in the blank with whatever it is you are using.
So "Get this sweet" or "Get this pencil" or "Get this phone".

Tell the group that for this exercise they have one objective. Which is to get the object.
What ways can they use to get it?

Say that you want to hear from everyone at least once, and once a method has been suggested it can't be repeated. For each suggestion you get, give out a sweet/ pencil and write the answer on the board. Try and distil each suggestion into a single verb, and encourage the writers to do the same.

As some examples:

Someone could ask.
Or they could attack.
They could distract.
They could threaten.
They could bribe.

They could blackmail.

Keep going around the room until you have heard from everyone and you have a good few verbs. These will form your list of tactics verbs. Tactics are the ways in which a character tries to achieve their objective. The range of responses from the whole group shows that even with such a basic, simple objective, there are multiple ways to go about achieving it. The tactics that a character chooses to use tell us about who they are.

Here is a list of tactic verbs, which you can draw on to run the exercise.

- | | |
|-------------|--------------|
| - Affirm | - Hoodwink |
| - Alarm | - Hypnotize |
| - Ask | - Insult |
| - Assure | - Invite |
| - Attack | - Lie |
| - Bait | - Lure |
| - Bargain | - Manipulate |
| - Baffle | - Minimise |
| - Beg | - Mislead |
| - Bombard | - Nag |
| - Bribe | - Negotiate |
| - Blackmail | - Order |
| - Bluff | - Please |
| - Bully | - Pester |
| - Charm | - Plead |
| - Coerce | - Propose |
| - Command | - Pressure |
| - Criticise | - Reassure |
| - Deceive | - Ridicule |
| - Demean | - Romance |
| - Dissuade | - Scheme |
| - Downplay | - Scare |
| - Enchant | - Sedate |
| - Endear | - Seduce |
| - Entrap | - Shame |
| - Entice | - Swindle |
| - Exploit | - Tempt |
| - Force | - Threaten |
| - Frighten | - Torment |
| - Flatter | - Trick |
| - Goad | - Urge |
| - Harangue | - Woo |
| - Hassle | - Wheedle |

Exercise: Scene Discussion
(20 minutes)

For this exercise, I used the opening scene of *Far Away* by Caryl Churchill, but feel free to choose your own text. You will need a scene from a play where one character is trying to get something from the other character. Two characters is best, to keep things simple. Go through the scene beforehand, and identify any tactics the characters are using.

Read through the scene as a group. When you have done this, ask the writers to go back over the scene and write down 5 tactics that are used by either character. Give them 5 minutes.

Share with the group.
(5 minutes)

The opening scene of *Far Away* is loaded with tactics. Earlier in the day, a young girl arrived to stay with her aunt and uncle. It is now late at night. The young girl, supposed to be in bed, has just witnessed her uncle committing a criminal act. She doesn't fully understand what she has seen, but knows enough to know that it is serious. Her aunt tries to cover up the meaning of the incident. So we have two characters. One is proactive, the other is reactive. They each have an objective. The young girl wants to find out the meaning of what she has seen without getting into trouble. The aunt wants to hide what is happening, and ultimately to control how her niece thinks about what she has seen.

The aunt uses a wide range of tactics, among them:

- Lie
- Downplay
- Minimises
- Misleads
- Calculates
- Denies
- Excuses
- Exploits
- Criticizes
- Flatters
- Includes

Writing: Scene Rewrite
(10 minutes)
Individual work
Shared

Ask the writers to choose 3 tactic verbs for each character and to re-write their earlier scene so that each character uses their tactics against the other at different points throughout the scene. A full rewrite, the addition of the tactics should take the scene in new directions. They may find that it even changes the outcome. Where previously one character was unable to get what they want, now, armed with their new tactics, they may succeed.

Share:
(5 minutes)

Go around the group and ask to hear the rewritten scenes.

Note:

At the end of the workshop, it is worth giving the group a sense of the timeline of the project. There are two workshops left. During these workshops, they will be working on their final scenes. Ask the writers to have a look back through their copybooks during the week. See if there is anything that stands out, that strikes them as interesting and worth developing further. Ask them to think about what story they want to tell, what characters they want to tell it with, and where to set it

WORKSHOP FIVE

Structure & Form

Plays: *Love and Information*, Caryl Churchill

Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven, Young Jean Lee

Every Brilliant Thing, Duncan Macmillan and Jonny Donahoe

So, we've covered the essential building blocks of playwriting. Characters, Setting, and Dramatic Action. Focus now should shift towards the individual scenes. We will briefly cover other areas of playwriting (Structure & Form, Drafting & Developing) but the bulk of the workshops will be allocating time for the group to write.

Free-write:

(15 minutes)

This is a free-writing exercise to jump start idea generation. It's an exercise by Ola Animashawun, a UK writer and theatre-maker. For writers who haven't yet decided what they want their scene to be about it is especially useful, but it is valuable for writers at every stage of the process.

Spend a minute of free-writing on each of the following prompts:

- What makes you angry?
- What frightens you?
- What gives you hope?
- What do you think that you'd never say out loud?
- What makes you sad?
- What makes you happy

When you have done that, take 2 minutes and read back over what you have written. Underline/highlight any interesting turns of phrases, surprising ideas, anything that stands out, if a word/phrase is repeated highlight it.

When you have done that, choose one of those underlined/highlighted pieces to continue writing about for another four minutes.

At the end of this process, a theme may have emerged. Some characters might have begun to suggest themselves. A situation or a setting or an action might be coming to mind. Hold those thoughts. Scribble them down. We'll come back to them.

Let's talk a little about how to arrange a story in different ways.

Introduction: Structure & Form (10 minutes)

We can think about all of the things we have covered so far (character, setting, drama, story) as being the *content* of our plays.

Structure and Form are about how we present the content.

Form is how we shape the content.

Structure is about how we arrange it.

Structure.

Structure is the order in which we arrange the content.

There is a certain dramatic structure that is very familiar to us.

We find it in everything from nursery rhymes to mainstream Hollywood blockbusters.

It goes something like this:

- We meet our main character
- We witness their world, see their routine
- Something happens, an incident that sets the main character on their journey
- There's a minor setback, the main character struggles and prevails
- Things go well
- About $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way through, there's a major setback
- Things look bad
- Things look really bad
- The main character draws on all of their experience accrued so far, their friends rally, ultimately they succeed or they fail.
- Finally, there is a new status quo, our main character is changed in some way, and everyone lives happily ever after or does not.

This structure follows a traditional, linear model of time. There might perhaps be flashbacks to fill in gaps in the main character's backstory but beyond that it is relatively straightforward.

A very famous example of a non-linear structure is Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. That movie tells a story of interconnecting characters, then further complicates things by presenting the scenes out of sequence. A character who has been killed in one scene appears later in the movie because that event takes place earlier in the storyline. People online have assembled a linear cut of the movie which has some novelty value but, ultimately, misses the point. The movie is ordered specifically in the way that it is because

each successive scene provides more information about the world and the characters, recontextualising the scenes which have gone before. This kind of dynamic, constantly updating story makes for an engaging experience for the audience.

Within the theatre, Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* uses a reverse-chronological structure. Pinter's play takes a well-worn story (A husband and a wife and their friend, who has an affair with the wife) and tells it backwards, starting with the end of the affair and moving towards before it even started. This structure means that details that might be insignificant when shown in order (the first moment the friend and the wife became attracted to each-other) are given enormous emotional impact because we understand what it is they will lead to.

So that's structure.

Form.

Form is the way you shape a story. How you tell it. The same story can be told in lots of different ways.

A love story can be told

- As a musical
- As a list
- Using one performer to play both parts
- As a lecture/powerpoint
- As spoken word poetry
- As the messages exchanged between the characters.

The story is the same, but the way that it is told is different.

As an example, Duncan Macmillan and Jonny Donahoe's *Every Brilliant Thing* is a story about a young man whose mother struggles with depression and has attempted suicide on several occasions. The story could be told through showing scenes from the young man's life, encounters with his mother, heartfelt confrontations. Instead, the script is in the form of a list of reasons to keep living. The simplicity of the form packs an enormous amount of emotional power.

So there are lots of possibilities, which can be slightly daunting. The key idea is that there are lots of different ways that plays can look. So if any of the writers are feeling like they want their play/scene to be something different, they should be encouraged to go for it.

Brainstorm: Character Constellation
(10 minutes)

We're going to start to develop our scenes now. This is an exercise from Kendall Feaver, an Australian playwright, about building up the cast of characters.

Let's go back to the free-writing from the start of the workshop. Ask the writers if there is a character, or an idea/situation/setting from the free-writing that they want to work with. Or, totally separate from the free-writing, if there's a character/idea/situation they want to write about.

When everyone have chosen, ask them to get a fresh piece of paper and write their character at the very centre of the page, and draw a small circle around it.

Then ask them to draw three circles around that central one. Each concentric circle larger than the last one. Sort of like a dartboard.

First circle: Write any characters with a direct connection to the character/situation/setting in the centre. E.g. A member of the main character's immediate family, or their best friend, or their partner. If it's a situation/event/setting then whoever are the people directly involved.

Second circle: Write down the people they come into contact with regularly. People that they work with, go to school with, teachers, someone on their commute.

Third circle: Anyone who enters into their life occasionally. This could be their dentist, someone who works at the library they study at, a distant relative.

Try to average around five people in each circle (so if the first circle is only 2-3 people, perhaps the next one can be 5-6, and the one after that 7-8).

So, we have a map of roughly 15 people that all have in common one central character/situation.

The next step is to think about the relationships between these characters. Which characters interact with each other, and in what ways? How necessary each character is to the story. Tell the writers to pick the characters who interest them the most, the ones they want to use to tell their story.

Note: From a practical point of view, but also from an artistic one, you want the minimum number of characters necessary to tell your story. This is practical because the more characters, the more actors you will need. This raises issues of funding and timetabling. This is not saying to never write a big play with lots of characters (actors can double up,

there are always theatrically inventive ways to tell a story) but the characters need to have a reason to be in the play. In my experience, characters without enough of a reason to be in the play often end up being really hard to write. They tend to stop talking and disappear off the page. You get to the end of the scene and suddenly you realise this character has been in the room the whole time.

With the characters chosen, write their names down on another page.

Write down some details about them.

Write down their relationship to each other.

Write down where they could encounter each-other, and under what circumstances

Writing:

(25 minutes)

Not shared at this stage

Give the group a solid block of time to write their scenes.

After roughly 25 minutes, take a break. When we come back, we'll do a short exercise, then continue writing for the remainder of the workshop.

Best Thing / Worst Thing

(15 minutes)

This is an exercise I came across in a workshop by Tom Holloway, a British playwright. It explores causality, what is at stake for your character, and how to thread together stories by things that happen.

Ask the writers to choose their main character.

- What is the best thing that could ever happen to them?
- What is something that could make the best thing happen?
- What is something that could make the thing happen that makes the best thing happen?
- Finally, what is something that could make *that* thing happen?

So, for an example. The best thing that could happen is:

They win a car → They won a car because they bought a scratch card → They bought a scratch card because they needed cheering up → They needed cheering up because they just got dumped.

Spend 5 minutes on this.

Next we will examine the opposite.

- What is the worst thing that could ever happen to your character.
- What is something that could make the worst thing happen.?
- What is something that could make the thing happen that makes the worst thing happen?
- Finally, what is something that could make *that* thing happen?

As an example, the worst thing that could happen is:

They get fired → They're fired because they've been drinking on the job → They drink at work because they don't take the job seriously → They don't take anything seriously because of a near-death experience last year.

Spend 5 minutes on this.

This can be useful for writers beginning to put together scenes. If they know they want a particular event to happen in their play, figuring out the chain leading up to that can give them a sense of possible scenes they can string together to achieve that character trajectory. It can also add significance to seemingly ordinary events. If we know that a character's downfall is as a result of a gambling habit, then an early scene where they are persuaded to place a small bet which they unexpectedly win takes on greater emotional proportions.

Writing

(Remaining time in the workshop)

Allocate the remaining time in the workshop to writing the scenes.

WORKSHOP SIX

Drafting and Developing

Plays: *Top Girls*, Caryl Churchill
X, Alistair McDowall

This is the last workshop of the series. We're going to talk briefly about some useful technical notation, and then quite quickly move on to writing. We'll pause for a bit to talk about drafting and a bit about developing ideas. But the main thing for this workshop is finishing up the scenes

Introduction: Technical notation (5 minutes)

It can be difficult to convey on the page the specific way you imagine a dialogue scene to go, the rhythm of it. Having one line of dialogue after another is a bit clean-cut, and doesn't feel very true to life. What if you want to write a scene with an old married couple, telling a story and freely interrupting each other in the process? Well, as it happens, other playwrights have felt the same frustrations and come up with some of the following ways to express such quirks of dialogue!

- An interruption. Someone being cut off, or even someone self-interrupting.
- / The interrupting slash. Or the Churchill slash, named after Caryl Churchill who established its use with the publication of her play *Top Girls* (see p. 24 for an example) Place the slash at the point in a line of dialogue where you want there to be an interruption. The next line of dialogue starts immediately, while the initial line continues.
- ... Trailing off. Where a character is lost in thought, or has run out of words to say.

Pause Silence. The length determined by the actor/director.

Beat Shorter than a pause. A beat is a moment of hesitation, of adjustment, of realisation.

Sometimes when writers are using notation such as this, and even other kinds, they will include a note at the start of the script with a brief key for what each symbol denotes. An

example of this can be found in the start of *X* by Alistair McDowall and, as mentioned before, *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill. Highlight how in each note, the playwright goes on to provide some extra contextual information about the play. It's a way of communicating with whoever picks up a script, so that tomorrow or years from now someone could stage a production of your writing solely from the words on the page.

Free-write:

(10 minutes)

This free-writing exercise is going to be applied to the scene the writers are working on. It's a way of adding deeper detail to the characters and their relationships. Unlike previous free-writing exercises, when I give the prompts one at a time, for this I give the full set of questions and give the writers 10 minutes to work through at their own pace.

How long have the characters known one another?

In what capacity do they know each other?

What do they openly like about one another?

What do they openly dislike about each other?

What do they secretly like about each other?

What do they secretly dislike about each other?

What do they get from one another?

What do they want from one another that they don't currently get?

Writing:

(25 minutes)

Give the writers time to work on their scripts. As there's a large quantity of solo writing during this workshop, after 25 minutes you could give the group a break. When we come back we'll discuss drafting, do a brief exercise, and then return to writing.

Drafting:

(10 minutes)

When we redraft a piece of writing, there are certain things to look out for. Three important ones are Exposition, Consistency, and Clarity.

Exposition:

Exposition is the information an audience needs to know in order to understand a story. A certain amount is essential but too much and a scene starts to feel very heavy. As well as

this, if exposition is just presented without any alteration, then your characters start to feel like they are just feeding plot points to the audience.

To use an example. We'll look at an exchange containing three pieces of information: The two characters are sisters, they were orphaned at a young age, and one sister is a highly skilled scientist.

One with exposition:

- A Claire, my sister, how was work today at the laboratory where you are chief technician?
- B Great. I'm so happy to work there.
- A Do you think Mum and Dad would be proud?
- B I don't know. They died tragically when I was very young, remember?

One with exposition (buried):

- A Hi, Claire
- B Hey.
- A How was work?
- B Great. I'm a bit tipsy actually.
- A Is drinking in the lab not frowned upon?
- B There was a reception. Women in STEM.
- A First female chief technician and all that?
- B Did a speech and everything.

Beat.

- A You know they'd be dead proud.
- B Yea?
- A Course! Mum'd be bawling, Dad would probably have that camcorder.
- B I guess
- A He had it on all the time, do you remember?
- B No. Not really.

Consistency:

Consistency is something to look out for in different ways: Dialogue, Behaviour, and Detail.

Dialogue:

If a character is speaking very formally on one page, then using slang on the next it feels as if the character is not quite the same. Now, there can be situations where a character would speak in a particular way to one group of people, and change how they speak when they are with another group. Likewise, a character could, in a moment of high emotion, lose their temper and say things they wouldn't ordinarily. This is totally acceptable, just ensure that it's intentional, that there is a reason the character is changing their speech.

Behaviour:

Similar to dialogue, what we are watching out for is if a character is behaving a certain way throughout your play. If they are consistently very honourable and conscientious, it would feel out of character for them to turn around and do something very self-serving or underhanded. Which is not to say they can never change. It can be really dramatically interesting to see a person change and grow in response to their changing circumstances. Over the course of three plays, Shakespeare shows the young Prince Henry go from being an immature and wild youth to a mature, capable leader.

Details:

This is often a matter of proofreading and making sure everything lines up right. If a character in one scene says they are a dentist, and then in the next scene says they're a veterinarian, that's an inconsistent detail. Similarly with timelines, if a character is describing a bar fight they were in eight years ago, but the character is only 20, the detail sticks out as an inconsistency (unless the character had very crime-filled preteen years).

Clarity:

If there is some complicated plot point within your story, it is best to make sure you get it absolutely clear. What I often think of is a detective story, in which certain key pieces of information are necessary in order for the story to be clear.

Start by having the characters say it outright. Try to get the information down in the right order that you want it. Then look for ways that you can bury the information so it is not pure exposition. Perhaps the revelation is in response to a tactic another character uses. Or the clue is revealed by someone trying to make themselves look good and oversharing. Give a motivation for it to be revealed beyond the audience needing to know. It can be a very tricky thing to do, so don't worry if you are having any issues with it. It's about striking a balance between stultifying explanation and maddening ambiguity.

Once you have done this, I think it is worth giving the scene or the piece of writing to someone else to see if it is clear. Don't give them any info or ask them any questions in advance, let them read it through. Then ask them what they thought happened, if they understood what happened, were there any confusing moments.

Exercise: Consistency (5 minutes)

This is an exercise that can be really good for getting writers to look at their own work with an editor's eye. The group can use the scene that they are working on.

First, ask the group to cover over the characters' names on the left hand side of the page, then read through the scene paying attention to the dialogue. Can they tell which character is speaking based purely on the way that they speak? This is a good way to check if characters are speaking in distinctive, consistent ways.

The next step is to look at the entire page of dialogue and slightly squint your eyes. What shape is the dialogue on the page? What does that tell you about the scene?

For example, if there is a long, unbroken piece of text I might guess that this scene is a speech, a confession, an emotional outburst. Likewise, if there are lots of very short lines between two characters, then I might think that this is a couple having an argument, or an interrogation. Where the writers can apply this to their own writing is by thinking about the kind of scene that they want to write and whether it matches up with how the text appears on the page. If it's meant to be a romantic scene with a young couple, and on the page there is an enormous tract of text from one character, then I might need to think about a rewrite.

For the final exercise in this self-editing section, ask the writers to have a read through the scene and look out for any question marks. When they have located one, read that line and the line immediately after it. Is the question answered or ignored? Is it misinterpreted or met with another question? As a general rule, a question that is asked and then answered immediately and honestly is less dramatically interesting than an exchange in which the character asking the question has to use several tactics in order to get the answer that they need.

Writing: Scene (25 minutes)

Give the writers time to continue working on their scenes.

If anyone has finished, they can apply the drafting skills to look out for exposition, consistency, and clarity in their scenes.

Wrapping-up:

At the end of the workshop, ask the writers to send in their finished scenes. When they have been given feedback, you could allocate another class to integrating your notes and typing up the scenes. A fun way to wrap-up the project would be to cast the scenes from the writers within the group and arrange readings of everyone's scenes. This gives the young writers a chance to hear their work performed and gives a feeling of conclusion to all of the work that has been done over the past workshops.

Games & Exercises

Names

Go around the room, with everyone saying their name and their favourite thing to have for breakfast.

One-word story

Go around the group telling a story, with each person adding one word at a time. This can be done with everyone still seated at desks.

Co-ordination/ X's and O's

Ask the group to draw a circle in the air in front of them with their right hand.

Ask the group to draw an X in the air in front of them with their left hand.

Ask the group to do both at the same time.

So far so good.

Ask the group to switch, draw an X with their right hand and an O with their left.

One-sentence story

Go around the group telling a story, with each participant adding a sentence at a time.

This is a bit more controlled than the one word story, which quite often veers off into surrealism at a moment's notice.

After having played this a few times, tell the group that they have only one go around the circle. Remind them about having a beginning, a middle, and an end. Tell them to think about what point in the story their turn is. They will need to work together to tell a story that has a satisfying arc to it.

Fortunately / Unfortunately

Go around the group telling a story. You supply the first sentence; a statement introducing a character. The next person has to start their sentence with Fortunately. The person after that has to start theirs with Unfortunately. From then, they alternate.

The same rules apply. Participants should try to have a narrative arc in the story. However, there are lots of twists and turns along the way.

So, as an example.

There was a young woman named Amara who was allergic to rain.

Fortunately, she had a very large, very waterproof umbrella.

Unfortunately, one rainy day the umbrella got a tear

Fortunately, Amara had some sellotape with her

Unfortunately, she didn't have a scissors

And so on.

Each sentence should follow on from the previous one, without any wild jumps in causality. So after our "Fortunately she had an umbrella" the next Unfortunately should be about the umbrella, instead of about a meteorite about to hit planet Earth. We can get to that point, but we need to build toward it as a group. This is good storytelling practice, but on a deeper level I believe it is to do with respecting the offer of the person who went before you. Instead of disregarding and leaping over their suggestion, we are building on their offer and transforming it.