

a beatbybeat book

# Teaching Playwriting

A step-by-step guide to fostering  
creativity in your classroom.



Sophia Chapadjiev

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# How to Use This Book

I'd recommend that all classes – regardless of playwriting experience – begin with **The Basics**. Before students dive into writing plays, it's useful for them to know what plays are, how they differentiate from other literary forms, and where ideas can come from. From there, dialogue, conflict and plot are introduced and explored. And then it is onto character work. In this book, creating character is approached in three different sessions. One of these approaches to character will suffice and yet, if you have time, feel free to try more than one method to give students options into generating character. The Basics section then rounds out with monologue work.

Before you are completely through **The Basics**, decide which track you want your class to follow in **The Practicum** – that way you can already start tailoring your lessons to your eventual track. An overview of the three different tracks can be found on page 3, but in a nutshell: Track I is for plays written by individuals; Track II is geared towards plays written by small groups; and Track III focuses on a play written by an entire class. If you or your students are new to playwriting, consider choosing Track II or III.

Most sessions commence with a review or a “Do Now” before moving on to activities, and then closing with reflection and follow-up. Within the chapters, you will also find shaded boxes offering teaching advice, side-coaching suggestions, text samples and vocabulary words.

I'd recommend, if possible, that students have a dedicated playwriting folder or notebook where new ideas can be jotted and where vocabulary notes, character sketches and completed writing exercises can be stored and accessed for future reference. You never know when a simple writing activity can germinate into a full-fledged new play idea. Be sure to also check out **The Bonuses** for additional material and follow-up activities and **The Worksheets** section for handouts referred to throughout the book.

I think ten sessions would be a good approximation for the duration of this project – and yet it can certainly be done in less or more time depending upon the needs of your class and the time you have to dedicate to the unit. In terms of target age group, I have used these methods with students ranging from 10 to 18 years of age and yet most of the activities can be adapted for younger – and even older students.

Lastly a note on play length... I recommend quality over quantity any day and so I would stay away from attempting full-length plays, focusing instead on the short play format. To that extent, I would suggest plays be approximately 10-15 pages for individuals and small groups and then 20-25 pages for a class written play.

## At a Glance: Choosing the Right Track for Your Class

Track I Play by INDIVIDUAL	Track II Play by SMALL GROUP	Track III Play by ENTIRE CLASS
<p>The individual student is responsible for creating original character and storyline, then writes play entirely on own.</p>	<p>3 to 5 students write a play as a group. They collaborate on creating characters as well as a plot. Each individual is then responsible for the writing of one scene (or moment) of the play.</p>	<p>The entire class will work on a single play. Students will be responsible for creating characters as a group and then writing scenes also in groups.</p>
<p>Recommended for setting where homework is allowed and students are eager to write and are self-motivated. Ideal for drama groups and creative writing classes.</p>	<p>Recommended for a language arts course setting where the bulk of the work is done in class. Good for slightly older students.</p>	<p>Recommended for classes with a particular theme or writing focus in mind. Best suited for younger students.</p>
<p>Advantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ownership of an entire idea from beginning to end</li> <li>• Able to submit to young playwright festivals which don't often take group works</li> </ul> <p>Disadvantages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher has a large number of plays to read, grade, and/or comment on</li> <li>• More difficult to have all plays shared aloud</li> </ul>	<p>Advantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Able to rely on team for inspiration and collaboration</li> <li>• Output of only 4-5 plays has more of a likelihood that all can be shared aloud</li> </ul> <p>Disadvantages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slight chance of play choppiness unless someone is overseeing transitions to make it seamless</li> <li>• Students perhaps limited in only writing one scene</li> </ul>	<p>Advantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher able to oversee play's theme and shape</li> <li>• 20-30 minds sometimes better than a single one</li> <li>• Can enhance a subject already being studied</li> </ul> <p>Disadvantages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not every student will get a chance to perform</li> <li>• Individual writing voice does not get featured</li> <li>• Some may not contribute as much as others</li> </ul>



The following pages are a free preview of Chapter 7 from the book. You may print these pages and use these activities in your class.

**Review:** Take a moment to go over the character work that students have done so far. No matter what method was used to create a character, students should have a firm grasp and be able to easily answer questions about their character.

## Warm-Up: Talk for a Minute

### Speaking as Themselves

Have students pair up for this activity. One student is “A” and the other is “B”. Each student has one minute to speak on a given topic. Their mission is to stay on topic to the best of their ability and to talk for the entire sixty seconds without stopping.

If A goes first, B’s job is to listen and keep track of A’s speech habits. Does A pause a lot? Use “ums” and “ahs” repeatedly? Are there words she repeats more than others?

Once the minute is up, it is now B’s turn to speak on a different topic and A’s turn to listen and pay attention to B’s habits.

After the second minute is up and both partners have spoken, open a discussion up on what students noticed about their experience when speaking to and observing their partner. Was this a hard/easy activity? Why? Were they able to stay on topic?

### Speaking as a Character

Tell them that they are going to do this exercise once more, but this time, they will speak in the voice of a given character. To prompt them, you will provide part of their first sentence. This time B will start and the character they must voice is either a king or a queen. Write on the board the beginning of their first line and give them one minute to speak.

**Example:** *As king/queen of this great nation of ours and all its people, I feel it is my duty to discuss...*

You can either give them the topic or let them choose. After the minute is up, it’s A’s turn again. Give them a completely different character. Here’s a possible first line prompt:

**Example:** *So I said to her, “I may be a slow-witted giant with a nasally voice, but there isn’t a thing I don’t know about...”*

#### Possible Topics...

-volleyball	-chores	-school lunch	-the letter “M”	-school safety	-respect
-eggs	-herbs & spices	-worms	-rainbows	-normalcy	-peer pressure
-summertime	-camping	-water	-recycling	-dreaming big	-cyberbullying
-air balloons	-the circus	-ghosts	-the moon	-goodness	-acceptance

If they are able to stay on task without laughing, kudos to them!

Once again, discuss the experience as a class. Was it harder speaking as a character as opposed to speaking as themselves? Easier? Why? Did their use of language change when speaking as royalty or a slow-witted giant? How? How could this activity help us when writing for our characters?

## Introduce: Monologues

Ask students, “How many people speak in a dialogue?”

**Vocabulary**      **Dialogue – A conversation between two people or more.**

Once correctly answered, move on to “How many people do you think speak in a monologue?”

**Vocabulary**      **Monologue – A speech made by one actor.**

They’ve already spoken two monologues today, but now they will write a monologue for a character. The character can be one they developed from any of the *Creating Character* lessons or be wholly original. However, only characters with a completed *The Eight W’s of Character Development* worksheet (worksheet D) should be considered so that there’s biographical information already in place.

### Sample Monologues

Without too much preamble, tell students that you are about to read three monologues and after each one there will be questions.

#### Monologue A

WOMAN

This is mad crazy. Look at all this money. This is going to take care of everything. I can’t believe it. Oh, well, I better believe it. Looks like this is my lucky day.

Ask students what they learned about the character or situation from this monologue. They will most likely suggest that the woman is young because of the use of “mad crazy” and they may suggest that she won the lottery. Ask them if they know the latter for a fact. Generally speaking, they may guess about the situation, but there are not many concrete facts offered in Monologue A. All we really know is that a woman now has some money and that she may be young.

Next read the second monologue.



## Monologue B

CARRIE ANN

*(Looking at something in her hands)* Cherries. Cherries. Cherries. Cherries. Ohmygod. Cherries-Cherries-Cherries-Cherries. *(pauses for a moment and takes it all in)* Can this be what I think it is? Can this be real? I happen to tell a random stranger about my problems and like a guardian angel he swoops down to save the day. Oh, um, maybe I should get him some coffee. Do guardian angels even drink coffee? My God. Lucille is going to be fine. This kind of money is going to make everything fine. I need to call Dr. Angelo and schedule us in like now. And when Frank gets in – whenever he bothers to roll out of bed – I’m going to walk into his office, look him straight in the eye and tell him, “you can take this job and shove it ‘cause I quit!” And if Lucille gets better – *when – when* Lucille gets better, I’ll take her to Florida and enroll her in one of those fancy schools and we’ll go to Disney World everyday. This man – this-this-this this angel – has no idea that today he saved not one life, but two. Yeah, maybe I should get him some coffee. He can have all the coffee he wants.

Ask the following questions after the second monologue:

- What’s this woman’s job?
- How do they know that?
- Where does the scene take place?
- What does she mean by “Cherries. Cherries. Cherries. Cherries”?
- Who is the man she refers to?
- Why does she say he’s her guardian angel?
- What does the man give her?
- Why does he give her something?
- Who is Lucille?
- What might be wrong with Lucille?
- What’s the name of the doctor?
- What’s the name of the woman’s boss?
- What’s the woman’s relationship to her job?

After you have thoroughly reviewed the second monologue with the class, reveal that these two monologues are for the same exact character in the same exact situation. In Monologue A, however, we learn only a little information whereas in Monologue B we are given so much more.

Show the pictures of House A and House B (worksheets E and F) introduced in the *Creating Character I* lesson and point out that Monologue A is like the version of the sketched house while Monologue B is like the version of the detailed house.

Which version do students think audiences would appreciate hearing more?

Lastly, read the third monologue.

## Monologue C

CARRIE ANN, the WAITRESS

Wow! I was telling this middle-aged customer with a moustache all about the fact that my daughter needs an operation and then when I gave him the bill, he told me that he had enough money to pay for the cheddar cheese omelet, hash browns and orange juice he ordered, but, unfortunately, he didn't have enough to give me a tip because he only had ten dollars on him and the bill was \$9.96, so he offered me a scratch-off lottery ticket instead. I was kind of bummed. I really need my tips because Frank, my boss, pays me and the other waiters so terribly. I figured I'd win maybe five dollars at the most or nothing at the worst. But oh, well, at least he was a nice customer. Then I scratched the ticket off and I won the whole jackpot. My twelve-year-old daughter, Lucille, is now going to be able to have that surgery she needs on her kidney and everything is going to be okay!

Like the second monologue (B), the third monologue (C) offers a lot of details, but to some extent, it offers too many. Audiences like to feel smart in figuring some stuff out on their own, so try not to spoon-feed every detail to them.

### Outer versus Inner

Before they start writing, review with the class the difference between outer and inner monologues. Take a moment to go over the differences, perhaps providing a brief example.

**Outer Monologue:** When the character speaks directly to somebody and that other person is aware of being spoken to.

**Inner Monologue:** When the character speaks his/her thoughts out loud either to the audience or themselves.

### Monologue Focus

While it might be interesting to have a character share a random monologue about the time he slipped on a banana or the time he took a trip to New Jersey, remind students to keep their monologue connected to the character's journey. Carrie Ann's second monologue is about the moment she realizes she'll be able to afford her daughter's operation. A monologue about how she organizes her sock drawer just isn't relevant. Keep monologues focused. Other words of advice to share with your students:

- Monologues often happen at heightened and impassioned moments or an important moment during the play or your character's life.
- There should be a convincing reason why the character giving an outer monologue does not get interrupted by the person they are speaking to. Again, passion or anger or somebody who really needs to speak from the heart and be heard are useful here.

- Monologues should reveal something about the character.
- Keep your monologue present and active, so it's not a character just telling us about a story they remember.

## Activity: Write and Share Monologue

### The Writing

Give students a moment to review the character that they have created and the corresponding *Eight W's* worksheet.

Have students single out a critical moment when their character has something important to say.

**Examples:** The moment when...

- Dr. Angelo tells a stunned Carrie Ann that her daughter needs an operation. (outer monologue)
- Lucille is in the hospital again and Carrie Ann tells herself that she will stop at nothing to make this a better world for her daughter. (inner monologue)
- Carrie Ann, filled with anger, walks into Frank's office to give him a piece of her mind and to quit her job. (outer monologue)

Before they write their monologue, have students answer the following three questions at the top of their page:

**Question 1:** What moment are you writing from your play?

**Question 2:** Why is this a moment for a monologue?

**Question 3:** Is this an inner or an outer monologue? If outer, who is your character speaking to?

Monologue lengths vary, but if students are writing by hand, I tell them to aim for three quarters of a page single-spaced.

Lastly, remind them to incorporate passion and details, and to use language that is specific to their character.

Give students 7-10 minutes to write and revise.

### The Sharing

Have students partner with a neighbor. Student A briefly provides context and pertinent backstory, then reads their monologue to Student B. After A finishes, B comments, mentions details that stood out and asks questions if anything was unclear. Then it is B's turn.

While this is going on, walk around the room and skim a few monologues that aren't currently being read aloud to look for potential examples to share with the rest of the class.

Afterwards, ask for volunteers to share their monologue with everybody. If you don't get any volunteers, read a few monologues that stood out to you while you walked around. But usually, there are volunteers. Before they read, have them provide any pertinent details that are useful for the audience to know.

**Reflection:** Kings speak differently than giants. And giants speak differently than you. Despite the differences, we can always imagine what it would be like (and sound like) to be somebody we are not. Just as a city kid probably wouldn't say, "y'all come back now, ya hear" or a grandmother wouldn't say, "what's poppin', yo?" the words we give our characters to speak should be true to that character. And the moment they speak a monologue should be a moment where they have something important to express.

**Follow-Up:** No piece of art is necessarily perfect the first time through. Have students revise their monologue with a minimum of three changes or additions. At the bottom of the page, ask them to write down the reason why they made each change. Additionally, have them list what happens immediately before and after the monologue.



The following page is a more detailed overview of the three playwriting tracks.

By now, you've built a solid playwriting foundation for your students, covering a number of key topics such as character; wants; conflict; beginning, middle and end; plot diagrams; dialogue and monologue. Now it is time to pick the playwriting track that works for you and your class. (For an overview on track differences, see page 3.) To review...

### Track I



For Track I  
See page 47

For students writing a play on their own, their next steps are:

- Develop a story sketch and a plot diagram
- Write Section I: The Beginning (2-4 pages)
- Write Section II: The Middle (6-8 pages)
- Write Section III: The End (1-3 pages)

### Track II

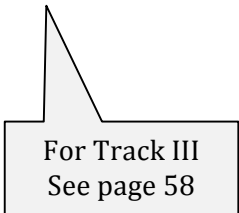


For Track II  
See page 52

For students writing plays in small groups (ideally groups of 4), their next steps are:

- Create and develop a protagonist and an antagonist
- Generate a story sketch and a plot diagram
- Divide the story, decide who does what, then write individual sections (each student writes 2-3 pages of the play)
- Put it all together and work on transitions

### Track III



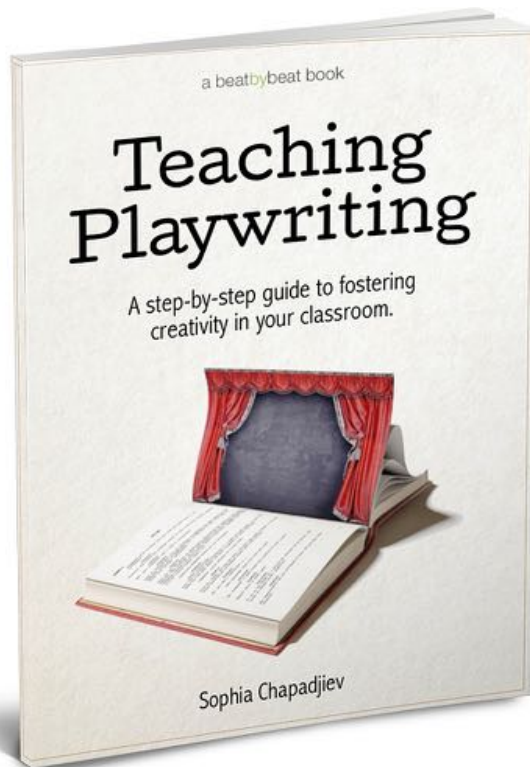
For Track III  
See page 58

For writing a single play with the entire class, the next steps are:

- Brainstorm play possibilities and main characters
- Come up with supporting roles, story sketch and plot diagram
- Break down scenes and develop characters
- Co-write scenes (each group writes 2-3 pages)
- Put it all together

I recommend reading through all three tracks regardless of the one you select to follow. You may find additional useful activities in the two other methods. Also, be sure to allow time for revision work after drafts are completed. For more on revisions, see page 67.

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