

Tips on How to Write a Winning Short Play - by Linda Loveland Reid

Create interesting characters. They should think, feel and have passion. What is your character fighting for, want? Short plays usually have max of 4 actors but can have any number of characters. Don't have one character only appear to deliver one line. Remember, in a short play the audience does not have two hours to get acquainted with the characters, so plunge in quickly.

Create the environment and keep it simple. Short plays are done with minimum set. Short plays are usually done with "unit" set – one location or room. If your play requires a plane to fly in, it might not get selected to produce, unless you have devised a clever, easy, inexpensive way for the theater company to make this happen on stage. No time to move furniture or change place setting. Keep it simple. A bridge can be represented by a railing, a grocery store by a shelf of cereal boxes and grocery cart. Are set pieces easy to find or make? How much work and money? Will they be easy to set up quickly on stage?

Continual Scene: A 10-minute play usually requires one scene, or at least, action that does not stop by blacking out lights and shifting to new scene. Two or more scenes are possible, as long as the "action" does not stop. This might be done by a narrator who keeps the play moving with no interruption while a set piece gets moved in or out. But, keep this quick and simple.

Write believable dialog. Dialog is everything. Avoid long paragraphs spoken by one character; this can begin to feel like a speech. If you are trying to sell a message, then find a clever way to do it without preaching to the audience. Be care with political messages as they can quickly become non-theatrical. Don't write a monologue, unless the submission rules okay it. Avoid cliché dialogue: "Hi, how are you" is not good dialogue.

Plays have an arc. This might happen in 3stages. 1) Introduce plot and issue. 2) Something happens to turn the play or issue. 3) Ending has resolution. 10-minute plays should start smack in the middle of issue to get play off the dime and into the fray. Plays need action, not just people talking. Write a scene that causes actors to move around on stage. The director and actors will provide much of this, but your plot and dialogue must enhance their efforts.

Character needs to change: To resolve your play, main character should undergo a change. Did they learn something that made them better? Worse? Did she change a habit or attitude? This can be subtle: he smiles for the first time and you know he's changed. Or change can be action related: divorce or a punch in the face. Just be sure your play tells a story that begins, fills out, and resolves. A play does not have to have a strong moral point, but a-moral plays don't please - if your character hurts someone and goes penalty-free, might not be as popular. Again there are subtle ways to deal with change.

Playwright's Notes: the playwright should designate when they want something specific to happen. You do not need to write directions for a character to walk across the room, unless it is to grab the fire-hose and spray the dinner party. Simple movements will be developed by director and actors. If the *feelings* of a character are important, and they are not clear in dialogue, then playwright should definitely. If in doubt, go ahead and write directions for actions or feelings.

Follow the Play Contest submission rules. If it says 10 pages and you fill them solid with dialogue, it will not be a 10-minute play. It is important to READ play out loud and TIME your reading. If it takes 20 minutes to read your play, it will not be selected.

Put the emphasis on good character development, a well thought plot, sensible set, and meaningful ending. Good luck!