

Try This At Home

Writing advice from 16 masters of dramatic form

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THERE IS NO shortage of professional advice to young playwrights. One can find it organized into chapters in a bookstore — the keyword “playwriting” returns beaucoup titles on Amazon — or, for a somewhat larger investment, packaged with an undergraduate degree or an M.F.A. Most writers will tell you, though, that they acquired their most valuable knowledge of how to do the work either through personal experience or directly from another writer. You’re on your own for the personal experience, but we asked a few of our writing friends to share some of their wisdom on the art and craft of dramatic literature. Here’s what they said.

Establish nineteenth-century working conditions. If you’re staring at nothing but a piece of paper, the only remaining distractions are the ideas ping-ponging around your brain. No phone, no Kardashians, no Snapchat — just you and the play. And unlike the real nineteenth century: macchiatos, you guys! - **Jonathan Rand** (*Check, Please; Hard Candy*)

Start by writing two-person scenes. The two-person scene is the proton of playwriting, the basic unit. A wants something; B doesn’t want her to have it. Everything A or B says or does is a tactic to get what they want. The scene is over when one of the wins. The two-handler is versatile; you can write a whole play with two characters, or with two-character scenes. The structure of a two-character scene — rising tactics, climax, resolution — mimics the structure of a full play. Also, plays are devilishly hard to read. One reason to limit your early work to two characters is that it gives skeptical literary managers easier access to your genius. — **Stephen Gregg** (*Trap, Crush, This is a Test*)

Here’s a lesson I found myself learning anew this summer: Revision isn’t an option. No matter how wonderfully you think you’ve written a play, if you don’t revise it (repeatedly), you’ve robbed yourself. Properly employed, revision is a discipline. It’s a religion — a constant, a way of life. Eternal scourge of self-satisfaction, revision should be applied to one’s work with the enthusiasm of a Grand Inquisitor. Only you can make your writing give up its sins. **Lee Blessing** (*A Walk in the Woods, Cobb*)

The first thing to remember is that you will get your break because there is something in your work that is not quite like anyone else’s. So, while writing courses can be helpful, please beware of following the established precedents too slavishly. Next, find your own way to deal with notes. I always leave three days after reading them to allow my rage to subside. In the end, you need to establish that you are open to suggestions and easy to work with. Finally, don’t wait until you are in the right mood. That way, you risk reaching your eighties without finishing anything. - **Julian Fellowes** (*Downton Abbey, Gosford Park*)

No one every knows what is or isn't going to be "successful," critically or commercially. In a way, this is a good thing because it forces you to fall back on writing what is truly important to you. Ironically, the show you write for yourself is more likely to find success than one intended to become a hit. – **David Henry Hwang** (*M. Butterfly, Golden Child*)

Start a writer's group! Find your people – other writers you respect and enjoy, who are generous and kind. And ...in your group and out, be mindful of only getting feedback that actually feeds you. We've all gotten feedback that leave us in despair, thinking we should just abandon the project and maybe look into sheep herding. It's hard enough to write. Nobody should make it harder. If you're getting feedback that doesn't inspire and excite you to go back to your keyboard, stop it! Even mid-sentence! It's your work, your career, your play – protect it, fiercely. – **Deborah Zoe Laufer** (*Informed Consent, Leveling Up*)

I wish I had been taught that every great play is imperfect and that great work refused to bow to received wisdom. Critics' darlings fade the fastest, and what ultimately remains will lose its original patina of scorn. Then again, I don't imagine you can teach courage. And most wisdom is lost on the innocent. – **Craig Lucas** (*The Light in the Piazza, Prelude to a Kiss*)

Most of the great playwrights were self-taught and learned their craft by hanging around with theatre people who were already smarter than they were. Anyone can write a play. The hard part is writing a play that other theatre people want to produce, direct, act in, design for, light, build sets for, even take tickets and usher for. This can take a long time and there will be many stumbles along the way, but if a playwright is smart enough to learn from her or his mistakes and can leave the blame game for others to play and then be mature enough to accept that the buck pretty much always stops with the playwright, then he or she is already on the way to success. The goal is to have a life in the theatre, not an unfulfilled yen for it. No one will care where you went to school or how many famous theatre artists you studied with or assisted. They will care very much about your script. It will always trump you, no matter how charming or educated you are. Determine the playwright you want to be, which is easier said than done – but that playwright had better be 100 percent yourself. For the immediate time being, Annie Baker, the Rapp brothers, and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins are already taken. Along your way, you will learn that a life in the theatre is its own reward. - **Terrence McNally** (*Love! Valour! Compassion!, Master Class*)

When I was eighteen I wish someone had told me how important it is to maintain good relationships with everyone. Your classmates can become your tribe in the working world if you think of your time in school as being the beginning of a lifelong working relationship with everyone I your class. I also wish I'd known to trust that when someone ways no, it doesn't mean no forever, but no for now. Opportunities to work always come back around, and in the time they are meant to. Trust the process. Flow. Lastly, I'd say make sure to have a life outside of playwrighting. It is the best way to feed your craft and have a happy, balanced life. – **Nambi E. Kelley** (*Xtigone, Native Son*)

Assume that everybody knows everybody, because they likely do. When I was applying for my first job in a literary office, it came up in conversation that the interviewer was good friends with one of my college professors (though they lived hundreds of miles apart). The first thing that happened when I left the room: the interviewer called that professor. I got the job. Nearly every theatre gig I've gotten has come from word of mouth or meeting friends of friends. So always be nice and work hard. The work doesn't have to be perfect, the effort does. Your reputation starts yesterday. – **Nicholas C. Pappas** (*The Ballad of 423 and 424, Including Shooter*)

I guess the best advice I could give a young playwright would be: through your work up on stage as soon as you can – don't wait for other people to produce you, produce yourself. You'll learn a ton, get to see your work, and start building your career. And then I'd say: write another play. And then another. – **Adam Bock** (*The Shaker Chair, The Thugs*)

The best writer day job I ever had was office temp. I was a playwright/office temp for nine years. A lesson I learned early on is that office need temporary workers but they don't want to be bothered by temporary workers. So if I looked pseudo-office busy, people ignored me. And there's nothing better than writing to look pseudo-office busy. Add to that I had designated time rides the subway to and from work, and an hour at lunch. Learn to write on the fly and you'll be amazed at how much you can get done. – **Lindsay Price** (*The Exile and the Onion Girl, Hoodie*)

Tell your truth. Write what you think is funny. But acknowledge the truths of others – there's comedy gold to be found in those conflicts. Acknowledge that there's a live audience in the room and use that theatrically. Don't write something that could just as well be a TV show. Play with audience expectations to get your point across, and hopefully get more laughs. Read your reviews. Take both the good and bad ones with a grain of salt. But also read them with an eye toward useful feedback. And rewrite, rewrite, rewrite. – **Reed Martin and Austin Tichenor** (*The Complete Works of William Shakespeare – abridged*)

If you want to write plays, I urge you to study improvisation. Not at the places that promise to make you a star on *Saturday Night Live*, but at places that emphasize character rather than caricature and patience rather than speed. It may take some researching, but many cities and schools indeed offer training in the serious branch of improv. If their literature invokes Spolin, that's a good sign. Viola wrote a book called *Improvisation for Theatre*. It's the bible of this field and contains a collection of the theatre games she created. It turns out that almost all of these games have corollaries to playwrighting techniques. – **Jeffrey Sweet** (*Kunstler, Flyovers*)

Writing lyrics is a craft. Use real rhymes, unless it's country or rap and you don't rhyme on purpose. Make sure when lyrics are sung, they fall on the same accents as speaking; don't add extra syllables to a line but make it scan, naturally. Stay away from clichés. When I finish a song, I go back over the lyrics hundreds of times until every single word says what I want it to say, has the right punch, and scans. A well-written

song is a work of art. Hopefully there is a twist at the end or something that will reverberate with the audience. When I write a song, I do not consider it finished until I love it, and sometimes I write fifteen different drafts of a song before I get it to that point. There is no magic formula. You have to put the time in and work through it until you get what you want. – **Joan Cushing** (*The Christmas Doll, Junie B. Jones*)

We have this myth that if you work hard, you can accomplish anything. It's not a very American thing to say, but I don't think that's true. It's true for a lot of people, but you need other things to succeed. You need luck, you need opportunity, and you need the life skills to recognize what an opportunity is. – **David Lindsay-Abaire** (*Rabbit Hole, Shrek the Musical*)