

You should write a play.
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You. The person reading this article.

You know it's crossed your mind. It was probably one of those stray thoughts you had the last time you got bored while sitting in a theatre. You were sitting there trying to stay engaged with what was happening on stage and wondering which armrest was yours and you thought: I could do better than this. I should write a play.

And you were right.

But you haven't done it. When was that resolution? Was it last week or last year? Why haven't you written something?

If you've thought to yourself that you should write a play but you haven't done it, then it's likely that one of three things happened: you got too busy; you started but didn't get very far; or, after thinking about it some more, you realized you didn't have anything to write about.

Let's look at each of those reasons for not having written and demolish them.

You haven't written your play because you were too busy

It's true. You are busy. You're balancing classes, work, family and friends just for starters. It's *plausible* that you don't have time to write a play. But it's not true.

You know from observation that the relationship between time and accomplishment is not straightforward. You've probably noticed, for example, that the times when you're the busiest are also the times when you're the most productive. And, as you know from cramming for your tests at the last minute, the most urgent task commands the most attention.

What you need isn't more time. What you need is a deadline: so let's give you one. A great deadline for a ten-minute play, which is what I'm going to suggest that you write, is Actors Theatre of Louisville's ten-minute play program. Their deadline starts on September first and ends on December first, but they only take the first five hundred plays.

If you're reading this when I'm first publishing it—late 2015— that deadline is too far away anyway. Go to Playsubmissionhelper.com . They have monthly listings of the upcoming deadlines so you can find one an appropriate amount of time in the future.

Don't worry too much about the numbers. If you're one of the 500 writers who submit to Actors Theatre your odds of winning are .2 percent.

499 plays are not going to win that contest. But some of those plays will get rewritten and then produced or published or both. And some of those playwrights put that play aside and think: now I know how to do it better. In other words, the value of the deadline isn't just in the plays that were developed for it; it's

also in the writers who were inspired to try something that they might otherwise not have.

You started but didn't get very far

Maybe you're one of those writers who did carve out the time to write a play and then, as you typed, you felt your head get light. Your chest tightened, like you'd just jumped into cold water, as you thought: What I'm writing isn't good.

You stopped.

What happened to you is a classic case of writer's block. And you're in luck, because writer's block is one of the most famously studied creative problems there is. Writer's block is almost always a case of your internal editor stepping in too early. You start to write something, but a voice in your head says, "No, this isn't good enough." The gap between the quality of what you're producing and the quality of what you want to produce is too great and so you stop.

It can help to think differently about what it means to write a play. If you want to stump four out of five of your friends (and nine out of ten of your non-theatre friends) ask them to spell both "playwright" and "playwriting."

If you want to stump everyone, including your teacher, ask them why playwright has a *gh* and playwriting doesn't. *Playwright* comes from the old English verb "to make." A playwright was someone who shaped plays, the way an ironwright shaped metal. Over time, the verb was misspelled as its homonym and the two words diverged.

But it's useful to remember that the Elizabethans thought of a playwright as someone who shaped a play rather than someone who wrote it.

To begin with, that means that you can write a good play even if you don't think of yourself as a good writer. You might have an ear for dialogue or—better—a sense of theatricality that doesn't manifest in those C-minus English compositions you dread writing.

More important, knowing that a play is something to be shaped can you as try to force out that crappy first draft.

And that's what you need to do: force it. You have to get that first draft down so you can shape it. You're a wright as much as a writer. A playwright is a sculptor who has to first create her own clay.

You don't have anything to write about

You feel like you have no ideas.

One of the things you'll find over time is that, counterintuitively, creativity thrives when it's limited.

In his documentary *The Five Obstructions*, the director Lars von Trier challenges his filmmaking mentor, Jorgen Leth, to remake Leth's short film *The Perfect Human* five times, each time with different conditions imposed by von Trier. He has to shoot it in Cuba with no shot longer than twelve frames, for example. Or make it as a cartoon. The resulting short films are each thoughtful, compelling takes on the original, except one. Leth struggles with the last assignment, which is that there is no assignment. He's allowed complete freedom and the result isn't very good.

That's an instructive result. If someone says: "Write a play. Go!" you might find yourself paralyzed. But constraints—obstructions—are springboards. If someone tells you to write a two-character play about an astronaut who's returned to earth after fifty having aged only three days, you'll have an idea. It might be an idea you reject for a better one, but either way your playwright mind is working.

So here is your assignment, full of obstructions:

Write a two-character, ten-minute play in which one character has a secret from the other character, and that includes something that's impossible to show realistically.

Why these constraints? Let's look at them one by one.

Two characters

The two-character scene is the proton of playwriting, the basic unit.

In a two-character scene one character wants something and the other character wants her not to have it. That's all there is to it. At some point, probably early, Cora declares what she wants and Abba opposes her. They use verbal tactics (charm, deception, intimidation) and physical ones (punches or kisses, for example) to get what they want. The scene is over when one of them wins.

The two-character scene is simple but powerful. There are lots of full-length plays that use only two characters or only two-character scenes.

And learning to write a two-character scene teaches you the basic model for any story: a character wants something but things get in his way.

Ten minutes

You want to start small. You wouldn't start learning to paint by trying to create a mural, and you shouldn't start writing plays by attempting an evening-length work.

That's actually a bad analogy, because if you were to decide to teach yourself by painting a (let's assume) bad mural, most people would walk by, glance at it, think "eh" and walk on.

But theatre is an art form that takes place over time. *Other* people's time. You must not subject innocent audience members to your learning curve. Even ten minutes seems long if the play's not working right.

As a playwright, you're making a contract with the audience. They leave their homes and pay to be trapped in their seats for a certain amount of time. Your responsibility, as the playwright, is to entrance. For now, that's easier to do in short form. It would be ironic if that long-ago moment when you were bored at the theatre had inspired you to write a too-long play.

One character has a secret from the other

A lot of playwriting is information management. When does a character know something? And when does the audience know things?

Giving a character a secret makes information a currency in your play. How much is the information worth? What will the other character do to get it? And you'll find you have to make a choice between whether the audience knows the secret—dramatic irony—or not.

Your play has to show something that's impossible to show realistically

Even though you're starting small, you want to think big.

Just because you're writing your story for the stage doesn't mean you have to limit yourself to writing things that could actually happen in that space. In fact, you shouldn't.

One of the best ways to entrance an audience is to show them something that they couldn't possibly have expected to see onstage.

Think about Stephen Sondheim's musical *Into the Woods*. A cow dies. Birds peck out the evil stepsisters' eyes. A giant strides across the land. Part of the delight of the play is seeing how those events are brought to life. (For a sample of how it's done, check out the hilarious, ever-growing Milky White Tumblr, filled with pictures of all the ways that theatre folk have put Milky White onstage, and then killed him.)

When you show an audience something that it would be impossible to show realistically, you do more than delight them. You put them to work. It takes mental energy to turn say, a stretch of blue cloth into a river, but audiences love expending that energy. There's no better way to pull an audience into your play than by making them conspire in the telling of it.

And if you've pulled your audience into the play, then it's guaranteed that they're not worrying about which armrest is theirs.

Now go write your play.

To recap: your assignment is to write two-character, ten-minute play in which one character has a secret from the other and in which something must happen that can't be depicted in a realistic way.

Your deadline is September 1, 2016, unless you find a better one. And by better, I mean earlier.