

How To Write A Ten Minute Play, The Ten Minute Play

By Pete Malicki

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Cast

Coach – male character who is demonstrating how to write a play

Guy – a young actor

Girl – a young actor

Scene

Guy and girl stand together centre stage. They are jogging on the spot, stretching and doing exercises as if preparing for a sporting event. Coach stands to one side where he can address both the actors and the audience.

Coach: *(to audience)* Today we will demonstrate how to write a ten minute play. This is Mavis and Herbert.

Guy and Girl wave, then frown at each other.

Coach: Lesson one. You're eighty-seven. Your characters aren't. Don't name them after your friends. Let's call them Sam and Robin.

Guy: Hang on. Who's who?

Coach: *(ignoring them and talking to audience)* My name's Brandenburg Cheesepants and I'm what you call a *device*, which in my case is a character whose sole purpose is to further the story without having any intrinsic value of his own. Lesson two: subject matter. You can write a play about absolutely anything but you must be aware that many topics are overdone. For example:

Guy: I don't know where I am. Oh, I've died and ended up in Purgatory slash Heaven slash Hell.

Girl: My life is terrible so I'm going to stand up high somewhere and do the will-I-won't-I routine.

Guy: Our relationship's in strife and we're going to sort it all out in one sixth of one twenty-fourth of a day.

Guy: Old person with dementia.

Girl: Visitor in a psychiatric hospital turns out to be the patient.

Guy: A time traveller.

Girl: Speed dating.

Guy: An inner voice.

Girl: Anthropomorphised inanimate objects. Talking body parts.

Coach: You get the idea.

Guy: A transgender Vietnamese buffalo-herder who quits farm life to open the first Subway franchise floating in the Pacific Ocean while he-she teaches him-her-self to juggle.

Coach and Girl turn to look at Guy.

Guy: Plus there are zombies.

Coach: Try to come up with an original idea, or a new slant on an old one. Lesson three: exposition.

Girl: Remember when we rode our bicycles to our friend Fiona's wedding and tried to take some cake back to our old apartment on Smith Street where we used to live, and that truck horned you so you flipped him off then he ran you down and now you're in a wheelchair?

Guy quickly mimes sitting in a wheelchair.

Coach: Backstory given purely for the audience's sake – often at the expense of believable dialogue – is what we call expository writing. There's usually a better way to give back story than exposition.

Girl: Dude, you're crippled.

Coach: A better way than that.

Girl: Can't we already see he's in a wheelchair?

Coach: Correct! Lesson five: don't explain the obvious. Give the audience some credit.

Guy: What, even these guys? (*points at audience*)

Coach: Even them. Well okay, maybe not him. (*points at random guy*)

Girl: Hang on, you said lesson five. Weren't we up to lesson four?

Coach: Well spotted, Alex. Lesson five: attention to detail. There's always someone in the audience who'll pick out your continuity errors, so be thorough.

Girl: But we've had two lesson fives and no lesson four. And my name's not Alex. It's Sam... or was I Robin?

Coach: Let's assume the first one was lesson four and the second one was lesson five, okay? Don't get off topic.

Girl: I don't know. You did them out of order so logically lesson four was the one about...

Coach: Lesson four: shut the fuck up! (*to audience*) Moving on. Dialogue. Other than telling the story, it has to be interesting. For example:

Guy: (*to girl*) I was walking along a footpath when a small dog walked up to me and stopped and looked at me and I looked back at him and he kept looking at me and I kept looking at him and I think I heard a voice in my head saying, "I am hungry. Feed me."

Coach: That dialogue could put a twelve year old with ADHD to sleep after a living and breathing 200 litre tub of red cordial has set him on fire.

Girl: Lesson six: don't use analogies if you're shit at analogies.

Coach: Okay then, sweetheart. Let me hear your version of the dialogue.

Girl: Fine. "As I meandered through the suburban nightmare that is my hometown, a nearby dog stopped by my feet at my approach. His lonely puppy dog eyes bore into my soul and I felt his thoughts penetrate the deepest depths of my psyche."

Coach: Well we hadn't quite reached the how-to-avoid-flowery-prose-because-it-makes-you-sound-like-a-total-wanker part of the show but it's good to get it over with. Dialogue needs to be authentic as well as interesting. If your character is a seventy-five-year-old man, he won't speak like:

Guy: (*old man voice*) Hey mole. Wanna chillax down at the bestie's, roll some J's and get our grill on?

Coach: Not very convincing, right? In the wider scheme of things, avoid what we call "talking heads."

Guy: I saw you flirting with him last week. You sat opposite him in that café and laughed at everything he said. How could you betray my trust?

Girl: It was not what it looked like. Billy-Ray has been going through such a hard time since his brother ran off with his wife.

Guy: Honey, there's a difference between consoling someone and acting inappropriately. You crossed the line. Blah blah blah.

Girl: It was an innocent coffee. Blah blah blah who cares.

Coach: *Dull*, right? If you want to talk about the past, write a short story. Theatre's about what's happening in the present. E.g.:

Girl: I know you're sleeping with her.

Guy: No I never did!

Girl slaps the Guy hard across the face.

Girl: (*screams*) Well guess what, you bastard. So am I!

Coach: See? Much more entertaining.

Guy: (*rubbing cheek*) My mother felt that one.

Girl: Cry-baby.

Coach: Okay, next lesson: the fourth wall. This is the imaginary division between the actors and the audience. Breaking the fourth wall destroys the illusion of reality but you can have fun involving the audience.

Girl: (*to male audience member*) Hey sexy. What you doing after the show?

Guy: (*to female audience member*) Ooh, I love your hair!

Girl: Me? I'm going home *by myself*. You fucking pervert.

Guy: I don't actually have strong feelings either way about your hair. I only said that because it's in my script. Sorry.

Coach: Humiliating your audience has its place. You can always get a good laugh out of picking on the bald guy. Do we have a bald guy?

Girl points at a bald guy, or into the thick of the crowd if no bald guys are visible. She laughs at him.

Coach: See? Good harmless fun. But God forbid if you ever do that to a bald woman. If you're going for the schadenfreude angle, certain targets are way off limits. If you pick on a gay you're a homophobe, a woman a misogynist, an Asian a racist, a fat person and you're just a heartless bastard, and if you ever insult an obese Chinese lesbian your career is over. That person is like an insult force field. Safest option is a bald dude or a ginger.

Guy: (*laughing*) Gingers!

Coach: I know, right? Anyways, I feel like we're getting off target. We're demonstrating how to *write* a ten minute play, not act in one. General advice: always be wary of throwing in cheap and unbelievable plot devices to garner more interest in your story.

Girl: I'm pregnant!

Guy: I'm gay!

Girl: I'm your sister!

Guy: I'm dying of AIDS!

Girl: I used to be a man.

Coach: If you're ever struggling to get humour out of your piece, aim for the gutter:

Guy: I farted in my cubicle yesterday and a bit of carrot came out, but I was too busy writing reports so I poked it back in with a stapler.

Girl: I got gastroenteritis after a big night of drinking *and* I had my period. My cat died from the stench.

Guy: My dick is wider than it is long.

Girl: You're a cunt pumpkin!

Coach: Avoid the careless use of red herrings.

Girl: Honey, let's go. We're late for dinner with my mother. And don't forget to pack my shotgun.

Coach: Now we're expecting her to blow her mother's head off. This is a very unsubtle way of showing a character's intentions and if you don't follow through there's no point including it in the first place.

Guy: (*disappointed*) Naw.

Coach: Oh, we're running out of time. Here's a very important topic to close on. Once you've come up with your original and clever story and illustrated it with lifelike and engaging characters, you have to find a way of ending your play. This is where most writers lose out. It's all going well, and then:

Girl: Predictable plot twist.

Guy: Eight minutes of setup then... punchline!

Girl: No ending in sight so it just finishes for no reason.

They all walk offstage. The lights go down. As the audience starts to applaud, the lights return and the actors come back on.

Coach: Do you seriously think we'd do that to you? You *can* end on a cliffhanger, such as:

Girl: It's the red wire.

Guy: No, it's the green one.

Girl: We have three seconds to go. Just cut one!

Guy: Okay, here goes.

Guy leans in to cut an imaginary wire.

Coach: And curtain! We don't find out what happens but it's still a real ending. Usually a play finishes with a resolution: a clear conclusion to the story so far.

Girl and guy look at each other, shrugging.

Coach: But this play has no story. How do you conclude a non-existent story?

Girl: We could all start singing?

Guy: What if one of us turned into a zombie?

Girl: What's with you and zombies?

Coach: The problem we face is that there was no *setup*. Lesson fourteen: always have a setup. Now we have no choice but to do something completely unexpected.

Guy: But we already tried the ending-for-no-reason ending.

Coach: *(points at random audience member in the front row)* You there! You're the only one who can help us get out of this. Join us on stage.

The girl and guy take this person up on stage, or if they're unwilling, anyone else who is.

Coach: Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to... *(to audience member)* What's your name?

Audience member gives name. If they attempt a joke or give an unclear name, Coach will say Bob.

Coach: [INSERT NAME OF AUDIENCE MEMBER] everybody! [NAME] will be performing our next act, an impression of a turkey stuffing a human for Christmas dinner. Good night and thanks for coming. Over to you... [NAME]!

The coach, guy and girl all leave the stage. Lights out.