

A Quick Guide to Writing Theatre Scripts

Theatre has been around for a very long time. There are many ways to write a theatre script, and lots of different ways to tell the same story. This quick guide will introduce you to the important points, but the best way to learn is to see a few plays, and read a few theatre scripts at your library, bookshop or local theatre. The BBC Writersroom resources page also has a couple of examples of theatre script format.

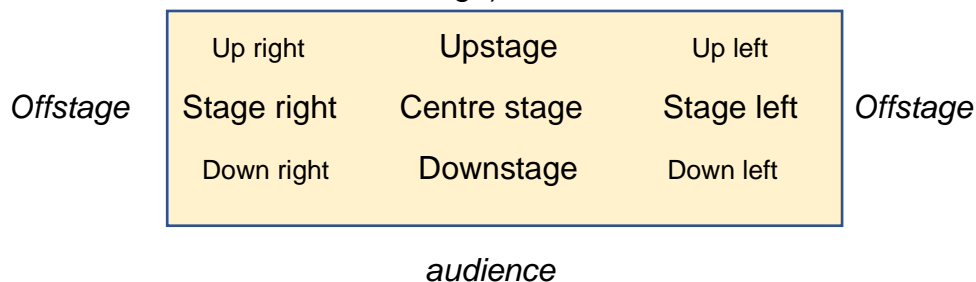
Setting the scene

For a start, you will need to describe where the action is taking place, so your reader (or actor/ director/ set designer) will understand the location. Bear in mind how long your piece is, and which theatre group is going to perform it. If it's a short piece, on a low budget, then you will only want to put in a suggestion of the setting. For example, if it's set in a grand country home, that's probably all you need to say. But if the characters will interact with parts of the set/ props then these need to be mentioned e.g. a sofa they might be sitting on, or a doorway they will be entering from.

Getting your characters on and off stage

The number of characters you choose to have will depend on the story you are telling, and the size of cast/ budget available. Your reader needs to know who is in the scene at any one time, and any potential director needs to be sure of this too. Make sure you are clear in your descriptions to indicate *when* a character enters and leaves. If it's important *where* they appear from, or where they *move to* during a scene, then add this as well. But don't overdo it – theatre is a collaboration: directors and actors will want to have creative input too.

A stage is traditionally split into different sections to help with this (*directions are from the point of view of the actors on the stage*):



Acts and scenes

Many full-length plays are broken into two acts, with an interval in the middle. Scenes within these acts are usually for a change of location, a moving forward (or back) in time, or when the characters change. One act plays can be shorter, and told in one sitting (perhaps an hour) without an interval. Plays with three or more acts can be longer, and have two intervals.

Theatre script format

One example of how to write your script is shown below. There are two ways to include descriptions of what's going on – either a) as a general description that may involve the movements/ reactions of several characters, or b) within the dialogue of individual characters. The aim is always for it to be a smooth reading experience i.e. there needs to be a clear distinction between what's being spoken, what's being acted, and what's being changed via lighting/ sound/ set changes.

ACT 1 SCENE 1

The office of a successful law firm. As well as three smaller desks, there is one imposing desk by a window. HARRIET is standing upstage, facing the city skyline.

PETER enters stage right, with a mug, and a pile of paperwork.

PETER: I have your coffee.

HARRIET: You're late.

PETER: I can only apologise. There was a queue.

HARRIET: You should have gone earlier. You dawdled.

PETER: *(placing the coffee reverentially on Harriet's table)* I'm not sure I dawdled, Mrs King.

HARRIET: *(turning to face PETER)* Oh? What would you call it?

PETER: *(thinking hard)* There may have been a touch of procrastination.

HARRIET: You aren't paid to procrastinate. You can do that in your own time. I have three cases to be completed today. Including *Lord* Mentogry.

PETER: I know. These are the final, er, bits and pieces.

HARRIET: Sometimes, Peter, I wonder why I hired you.

PETER: Because I'm conscientious, hardworking...?

HARRIET: *(sighs)* You may be my son, but that doesn't mean I will treat you differently from other members of the workforce.

PETER: I'm painfully aware of that.

HARRIET: Is Annabel here yet?

PETER: Not yet. Traffic.

HARRIET: Not procrastination then?

PETER: No mother, I believe that's just me.

PETER leaves.

The phone rings on the main desk. HARRIET grimaces, then answers it.