

Circle Theatre's High School Playwriting Project:

Curriculum for Writing a Ten Minute Play.

Each year, Circle Theatre hosts the annual High School Playwriting Project to benefit local students. We invite **all** DFW Metroplex high school teachers to enter 10-minute scripts, written by their students, for evaluation by an experienced panel of judges. The finalists' plays are performed in a staged reading by professional actors as part of our Finalist Reading Series on the campus of Texas Wesleyan University.

ON THIS CURRICULUM

We have developed this outline with the aim of encouraging educators to add HSPP to their required curriculum in the upper-level theater classes to encourage a love of playwriting, to develop original student work, and to build playwriting skills, thereby fulfilling the several aspects of TEKS listed with each lesson. In order to do this, without increasing the burden on teachers, we have provided curriculum suggestions. This curriculum has been crafted with input from local theater educators whose students have participated in the HSPP

We have outlined a suggested path to help students see this as an exciting opportunity with the potential to grow and develop their writing skills. Below is a sample schedule that slowly builds toward the creation of a 10-minute play, breaking down each objective into bite sized pieces. Students will learn that they **CAN** do this and that in doing so they are taking their artistry into their own hands. When they create each of these small pieces, they will create a play, and, therefore, anything!

We encourage the final result to be entered into our competition, but it can also be showcased in an after-school event, entered into your own 10-minute play contest, or used as acting and directing scenes in other upper-level classes. Together, you and the students will build a library of original work that can be used year after year.

This calendar outline serves as a suggested example for teachers to guide students in their process. It can be mixed and matched however works best for the teacher and their students.

Educator supplies: Oversized classroom paper that can be accessed throughout the process

Student supplies: A journal and writing utensil

WEEK 1 — WEEK 2 | GETTING STARTED

Here are several exercises to be used as a diving board into the HSPP process as a whole. These tools can be used in a mix-and-match fashion and do not all need to be completed (however, some build off each other). Each exercise will take about 10-20 minutes to complete, so they can be spread out throughout 1 - 2 weeks. Use them as warm-ups to your regularly scheduled lesson plans, or combine them into a whole unit.

WEEK 1- WEEK 2 is about allowing writers to get acquainted with the *act of writing*. It's a brainstorming week with zero pressure. The aim is to answer the question "how do I even start?!" These exercises will show a new writer how to start.

Teacher Supplies:

Oversized classroom paper

Setting Up the Week:

Introduce your classes to the idea of playwriting. Discuss: How do playwrights come up with ideas for stories? What makes writing a play different from writing a book? (dialogue, stage directions, etc.) Introduce the HSPP and tell the class that today/this week is about brainstorming.

TEKS Covered:

- Theatre, Level I:
 - (c)(2)(F) create, write, and refine original monologues, improvisations, scenes, or vignettes that reflect dramatic structure to convey meaning to the audience through live performance or media forms.
- Theatre Level II:
 - (c)(2)(F) create, write, devise, and refine original monologues, improvisations, scenes, or vignettes to convey meaning to the audience through live performance or media forms.
- Theatre Level III:
 - (c)(2)(C) analyze characters from various genres and styles, describing physical, intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions;
 - (c)(2)(E) write dialogue that reveals character motivation, advances plot, provides exposition, and reveals theme
- Theatre Level IV:
 - (c)(2)(C) analyze and interpret characters from various genres and styles, describing physical, intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions
 - (c)(2)(E) create individually or devise collaboratively imaginative scripts and scenarios.

WEEK 1 — WEEK 2 | CREATIVITY EXERCISES

Exercise #1 — Popcorn Brainstorming — Full Classroom

- A. Using a large piece of poster paper, write one of the following prompts at the top:
- What drives you crazy?
 - I believe that...
 - I can't believe that he...

Let students contribute answers and write them under the prompt for all to see. Leave it up for other classes to read/contribute to.
Example: "What drives you crazy?" "When people are late to meet me." "Loud Chewing."

- B. Using a new large piece of poster paper, ask for non-geographical locations
- A movie theater
 - A restaurant's kitchen
 - In line for coffee
 - A library
- C. Using a new large piece of poster paper, ask for a relationship two people might have with one another
- Student / Teacher
 - Mentor / Apprentice
 - Therapist / Patient
 - Actor / Director
- D. Have each student select an answer from A, B, and C categories. Ask each student to write a single "tagline" for a story that includes each of the three elements.

Exercise #2 — Developing a Character — Individual Writing (est. 20 minutes)

Have Students:

- A. Select one of the pairs of people from part C of Exercise #1
- Write out five descriptive sentences about each character. Give them a name, age, occupation, interests, etc.
- The result is having two characters with character descriptions
- B. Write out five true descriptive sentences about themselves as if they were a character.
- Then, add two more sentences about themselves that are UNTRUE
- They now have a third character description
- *These are just exercises and their plays do not need to include these characters

Exercise #3 — Writing a Monologue — Individual Writing

Have Students:

- Examine all of the answers from Exercise #1 and Exercise #2.
- Select one response from each piece of paper.
- They can use one of the characters created in Exercise #2.
- Write a 5-10 sentence monologue inspired by the prompts your class developed in Exercise 1

Example: Prompt: Pet Peeve? Loud Chewing | Location? In a library | Relationship? Student and Librarian
"Write a monologue that is inspired by this subject"

END OF WEEK 1 — WEEK 2 | CHECK IN

A short discussion reconnecting the creative work the students have accomplished so far. This is a way to point out all of the character types, situations, and settings they have already come up with that can be used in their scripts.

WEEK 3 — WEEK 4 | SECONDARY EXERCISES — MAKING CHOICES

WEEK 3 - WEEK 4 is about making preliminary choices. The goal is to take away the fear of ‘making a mistake’. Students can be naturally scared to pick the “wrong” subject or setting for a play. By the end of the week, it’s a good time to encourage them to select some tangibles about their play: setting, conflict, main characters. Students should have topics, characters, monologue, and conflict picked out..

Setting Up the Week:

Discuss: This is a great time to discuss making and trying choices with students. Let them know that this week will be a mix of trying out dialogue on their feet, letting go of fear of making the wrong choice, and ultimately selecting a path for their plays. Ask students:

- Did any of the brainstorming exercises give any students an idea of a character they’d like to continue to write about? Or a setting? Or a problem?

TEKS Covered:

- Theatre, Level I:
 - (c)(1)(A) understand the value and purpose of using listening, observation, concentration, cooperation, and emotional and sensory recall;
 - (c)(2)(J) identify the principles of improvisation
 - (c)(5)(C) offer and receive constructive criticism of peer performances
 - Theatre Level II:
 - (c)(2)(D) apply physical, intellectual, emotional, and social interactions to portray believable characters and convey a story when applying acting concepts, skills, and techniques
 - (c)(5)(C) offer and receive constructive criticism of peer performances
 - Theatre Level III:
 - (c)(2)(B) analyze creativity as it relates to self and ensemble and its effect on audience;
 - (c)(2)(C) analyze characters from various genres and styles, describing physical, intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions;
 - (c)(2)(D) experiment with improvisation and scripted scenes of various styles to portray believable characters;
 - (c)(2)(E) write dialogue that reveals character motivation, advances plot, provides exposition, and reveals theme
 - Theatre Level IV:
 - (c)(2)(B) demonstrate creativity as it relates to self and ensemble and its effect on audience;
 - (c)(2)(C) analyze and interpret characters from various genres and styles, describing physical, intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions
 - (c)(2)(E) create individually or devise collaboratively imaginative scripts and scenarios.
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WEEK 3 — WEEK 4 | SECONDARY EXERCISES — MAKING CHOICES

Exercise #4 — An Improv Exercise — Hearing Dialogue & Getting Out Of Their Heads

The aim of this exercise is for students to get out of their heads and onto their feet. To see if they are given a character, setting, and circumstance can they respond authentically to their acting partner?

Have Students:

- Break into pairs of two
- Give each pair a problem, a location, and a role from the popcorn brainstorming sessions in week 1 — this can be something the other students shout:
 - Ex: “What’s something annoying one person can do to another?” “Eat the last french fry”
 - “Where might this happen?” “Steak n’ Shake”
 - “What’s a relationship two people might have to one another?” “Father and daughter”
- First line begins “I can’t believe that you...” - (You can also try this where this line can’t be the first line, but must be said eventually)
- Each pair will improv for a timed one minute using those given circumstances
- For the next pair, you can change *one* of the circumstances to see how it might change the scene as a whole

This exercise helps work on natural dialogue — students can hear what naturally comes out when presented with a set of circumstances. This helps with learning how people talk to each other.

Exercise #5 — A Story with Multiple Authors — Freewriting and Letting Go

Have Students:

- Select a new “topic” from exercise #1 (a new problem, location, and relationship)
- Select the first sentence. Every student should use the same first sentence
 - ex. *Daniel’s alarm went off three times that morning. When he finally awoke, he was already 10 minutes late.*
- Using their journals students should write for 3-5 minutes — select an amount of time and set a timer
- When the timer goes off, the journals are passed one person to the left
- The next student reads what has been written, the timer is reset, and they will pick up where the previous student left off and continue the story
- This continues until the journals arrive back to the original write

Tip: Let students know when they should be wrapping up the story and helping shape the ending. Once the journals end up with the owners, the owners read the stories out loud.

Option: Have them critique: what works in this story? What doesn’t? Does it have a beginning, middle, and end? How would you change it? How has this exercise changed how you’re thinking about your future script?

Exercise #6 — Character Development — Individual Writing

Read a description of a character from a published play out loud. Ask students to:

- Write a description of *themselves* as if *they* were a character
- These should be true things about the student
- The description should be in a similar style as to what you would find in the front of a play
- When this is completed, ask students to add 1-2 sentences to the description of that self-character that are NOT true about themselves.
- Read the full character descriptions outloud.
- Discuss with the writer: would you watch a play about this character?
 - What draws you to interesting characters/what makes them interesting?
 - What about this you-character lends itself to a conflict or relationship?
 - Who would this person’s best friend be?
 - Who would this character dislike? Etc.

WEEK 3 — WEEK 4 RESULTS

These exercises will have led to the students’ learning of how to select a setting, a problem, and develop a character. By the end of this week, they should be able to have these aspects of their 10-minute play chosen. They don’t have to use a character they developed in class, but they can use that exercise to develop the characters they want to use in their script.

WEEK 5 — WEEK 6 | LAUNCHING + LONG FORM WRITING EXERCISES

WEEK 5 - WEEK 6 is students in writing sessions. Now that the students have picked out their characters, conflict, and setting, they will learn how to turn blocks of writing into longer increments and incorporate dialogue into their play.

Setting Up the Week:

Discuss: Let students know they will have in class time to write. If it works for your class, see if they can have 5 pages written by the end of the week. You can run one of the exercises for a warm up and then open up time for freewriting. Leave time for questions at the end of class.

TEKS Covered:

- Theatre, Level I:
 - (c)(1)(A) understand the value and purpose of using listening, observation, concentration, cooperation, and emotional and sensory recall
 - (c)(2)(E) analyze characters by describing attributes such as physical, intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions through reading scripts of published plays
 - (c)(2)(F) create, write, and refine original monologues, improvisations, scenes, or vignettes that reflect dramatic structure to convey meaning to the audience through live performance or media forms.
 - (c)(5)(C) offer and receive constructive criticism of peer performances
- Theatre Level II:
 - (c)(2)(D) apply physical, intellectual, emotional, and social interactions to portray believable characters and convey a story when applying acting concepts, skills, and techniques
 - (c)(2)(F) create, write, devise, and refine original monologues, improvisations, scenes, or vignettes to convey meaning to the audience through live performance or media forms.
 - (c)(5)(C) offer and receive constructive criticism of peer performances
- Theatre Level III:
 - (c)(2)(B) analyze creativity as it relates to self and ensemble and its effect on audience;
 - (c)(2)(C) analyze characters from various genres and styles, describing physical, intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions;
 - (c)(2)(D) experiment with improvisation and scripted scenes of various styles to portray believable characters;
 - (c)(2)(E) write dialogue that reveals character motivation, advances plot, provides exposition, and reveals theme
- Theatre Level IV:
 - (c)(2)(B) demonstrate creativity as it relates to self and ensemble and its effect on audience;
 - (c)(2)(C) analyze and interpret characters from various genres and styles, describing physical, intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions
 - (c)(2)(E) create individually or devise collaboratively imaginative scripts and scenarios.

WEEK 5 — WEEK 6 | LAUNCHING + LONG FORM WRITING EXERCISES

Exercise #7 — Getting to Know your Characters — Freewrite

Write everything you can think about your main character. These should be descriptive, complete sentences.

- These can be various characteristics, such as the following:

- What is their favorite color?
- What are they most afraid of?
- What is a secret they have never told anyone before?
- What did they eat for breakfast, do they like breakfast, what is their favorite meal of the day?
- Which family member are they closest to?
- Are they an Apple or an Android person?

Write everything you can think about the setting. These should be in complete sentences. It is helpful to use the five senses.

- What room are they sitting in?
The living room, the guest room, the pool house, their bedroom or their parents' bedroom, the laundry room, the dog house, the roof?
- Why are they there?
- What color is the room?
- What kinds of things do they hear in this space? Do they like it?
- What do they smell?
- What do they feel in the space? Does the setting make them happy, scared, does it bring back memories of nostalgia?
- How does the floor feel? Is it sticky? Is it made of wood? Is the wood new or old and does it give them splinters? Is the floor slippery, was it just mopped, are they slipping?, etc.

Exercise #8 — Writing Dialogue — Freewriting in play format

• Using the HSPP formatting found on page 8 (also available on circletheatre.com/hssp)

• Write a one-page scene in which their characters speak to each other

-These conversations can entail anything you'd like for them to talk about. If students are ready to use the conflicts within their plays, they should use that. If they don't have this yet, here is a prompt:

Ex: Holly and Ben have the same birthday. They are talking about what gifts they received. One person is jealous of the others' gifts. Did that person specifically tell someone to get them the gift the other one received? Is it really about the gift? What is it like for them to share a birthday? It can be as detailed or vague as you like, as long as each dialogue is true to the character — we don't have to know everything, we just have to understand that Holly and Ben know each other and have clear feelings about the situation.

Exercise #9 — Writing Dialogue — Freewriting in play format

- The Roof Exercise Come down from the roof exercise - prompt: you are on top of a roof. Someone on the ground tells you to come down. You say "No, and here's why..."
- Explore some reasons why someone wouldn't want to move, wouldn't want to take direction, wouldn't want to listen
- Explore some reasons why someone would want to stay, would want to continue to do what they're doing
- Once compiled, talk about the *strongest* choice, what made it a strong choice?

Exercise #10 — Checking In — Freewriting in play format

This is a great time to check in and see where the students are, what they need, what their questions are. Some suggestions for this time are:

- Peer reading - Have students switch plays and give feedback with someone they trust.
 - An AVID tool is 3-2-1: Three things the reader liked, two things that do not work, and one thing you would add or improve
- Questions - What question do students have at this time?
- Do they need more time in class to write? What would help?

Exercise #11 — Classroom Readings

- Have students select — or select at random — peers to read their characters out loud. This is like a staged reading
- This will give writers an opportunity to hear their dialogue out loud and interpreted by others
- Writers can use this to make clarifying tweaks to their plays

FINAL WEEK

This week includes making sure students have properly formatted their plays and title pages, and complete any re-writes and tweaks. Additionally, this will include practicing the skill of turning over their work and letting it go! It's a good time to have students exchange work for proofreading only to ensure no grammar or spelling errors have been missed. This is a great time to celebrate the hard work your students have put into this project, and encourage them to be proud of what they've written.

TEKS Covered:

- Theatre, Level I:
 - (c)(2)(F) create, write, and refine original monologues, improvisations, scenes, or vignettes that reflect dramatic structure to convey meaning to the audience through live performance or media forms.
 - Theatre Level II:
 - (c)(2)(F) create, write, devise, and refine original monologues, improvisations, scenes, or vignettes to convey meaning to the audience through live performance or media forms.
 - Theatre Level III:
 - (c)(2)(E) write dialogue that reveals character motivation, advances plot, provides exposition, and reveals theme
 - Theatre Level IV:
 - (c)(2)(E) create individually or devise collaboratively imaginative scripts and scenarios.
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THE DEBRIEF

Now that the students have turned in their work, it is encouraged that everyone talks about the process they've experienced. This may be the first time that students have written for others to read or at all! Take time to sit down with the students and ask them to share their experiences. Here is a list of questions that you are welcome to discuss with your students.

- **What have you learned from this process?**
- **What did you find difficult?**
- **Are you proud? Why or why not?**
- **What would you do differently?**
- **What parts of the building process/exercises were valuable to you?**
- **What are some things that you did well?**
- **What are areas for improvement? (No put downs)**
- **Has this encouraged you to write more plays?**
- **How has your outlook on writing/storytelling changed?**
- **Would you ever consider playwrighting as a career? What would be some challenges/benefits?**

TEKS Covered:

- Theatre, Level I:
 - (c)(5)(B) recognize theatre as an art form and evaluate self as a creative being
 - (c)(5)(F) explore career and avocational opportunities such as theatre education, arts administration, performance, design, management, and playwriting in theatre or media and evaluate the training, skills, self-discipline, and artistic discipline needed to pursue such opportunities;
 - Theatre Level II:
 - (c)(5)(B) analyze theatre as an art form and evaluate self as a creative being
 - (c)(5)(E) examine career and avocational opportunities such as theatre education, arts administration, performance, design, management, and playwriting in theatre or other media and evaluate the training, skills, self-discipline, and artistic discipline needed to pursue such opportunities
 - Theatre Level III:
 - (c)(5)(B) recognize theatre as an art form and evaluate self as a creative being
 - (c)(5)(E) make judgments about selected career and avocational opportunities such as theatre education, arts administration, performance, design, management, and playwriting in theatre, film, television, and other media and analyze the training, skills, self-discipline, and artistic discipline needed to pursue such opportunities;
 - Theatre Level IV:
 - (c)(5)(B) defend theatre as an art form and value self as a creative being
 - (c)(5)(E) evaluate selected career and avocational opportunities such as theatre education, arts administration, performance, design, management, playwriting, and dramatic criticism in theatre, film, television, and other media and analyze the training, skills, self-discipline, and artistic discipline needed to pursue such opportunities
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Feedback from previous HSPP Finalists



CROSSROADS

"I absolutely loved my HSPP experience! I had never written a play before, so I was truly starting from square one. I must have started with 10 different ideas/concepts and at a certain point, I just began writing! My first draft was revised and revised and revised until I finally felt like I had something that worked. Getting to do HSPP ignited creative energy in me that I really love, and I cannot wait to continue with and improve on. I never would have imagined that I would find so much joy, excitement, and discovery in playwriting. I certainly would never have imagined that I would be chosen as a finalist! Thank you so much to Circle Theatre for this wonderful and unique opportunity!"



CONTROLLING THE CONTROLLABLES

"The experience of this project was very fulfilling! It made me realize that playwriting is something I love and want to do for the rest of my life!"