

Catherine Bush's definition of what makes a good play:
A heightened situation which takes place in a compressed time period involving high stakes, dramatic action/conflict and some sort of resolution.

A play consists of the following elements:

1) Setting

The time and place of the action. Keep in mind that one of the biggest differences between stage and film is the ability (or lack thereof) to change locations.

My suggestion to anyone interested in writing for the stage is to **KEEP IT SIMPLE**. The fewer locations, the better. In fact, for the new writer writing a 10 minute play, I suggest keeping it to one location. (Again, this is just a suggestion, not a requirement.)

How do time and place affect story line?

Imagine your play is about a hostage situation – Bob is holding Bill hostage. What is the difference between Bob holding Bill hostage in the middle of the Sahara desert and Bob holding Bill hostage in a phone booth in the middle of Manhattan? In the first scenario, water and heat and remoteness play a huge role. In the second scenario, the population of NYC plays a huge role.

Let's say Bob has demanded \$1,000,000 in ransom to release Bill. In order to pay the ransom, Bill's relatives need to get to the bank. Here's where time affects the storyline. If it's 4:50 pm on a Friday afternoon and the bank closes at 5 pm and doesn't reopen until Monday... well, you can see for yourself that Bill's relatives could be in a bit of a pickle. That's why we go to the theatre, isn't it? To see people in a bit of a pickle (and to thank our lucky stars it's not us!)

So you see, setting – time and place – when used effectively can be a playwright's best friend.

NOTE: When writing any play –it is essential to use a LATE POINT OF ATTACK.

Let's reference the hostage situation above: if we have only ten minutes to tell this story, we don't want to waste time watching Bob wake up, get dressed, eat breakfast, etc. **We want to get right to the action** – perhaps we open with Bob shoving Bill onstage with a gun to his head.

2) Characters

The people in a pickle. Again, KEEP IT SIMPLE. Only the number of people needed to tell the story – no more. And when I say “tell the story” I don’t mean to imply narration. In fact, characters in a play aren’t defined by what they say – they are defined by what they do. Here’s some great advice from television writer Aaron Sorkin...

“Never tell the audience who the character is. Show the audience what the character wants.”

In other words, actions speak louder than words. Yes, the characters speak – but every word they utter is used in an attempt to get whatever it is they want – which leads us to...

3) Dramatic Conflict = Needs + Obstacles

Every character entering a scene has something he wants desperately. This is the character’s need. *In a good play, there is an obstacle preventing him from getting what he wants.* This creates *dramatic conflict*. Without conflict, there is no play. Instead, we are left with people simply talking to each other. **WE MUST HAVE DRAMATIC CONFLICT!** That’s not to say that every play has to be a serious drama; comedy is fraught with conflict. In theatre, conflict is a good, good thing.

Another important thing to remember here – **KEEP THOSE STAKES HIGH!** The more important the character need – the more urgent – the more life-and-death – the better. Let’s use the aforementioned hostage scenario as an example. If Bob needs money just so he can buy a big house and join a country club – who cares? But if Bob needs money to buy a big house and join a country club to impress his former high school sweetheart and love-of-his-life Sheila who dumped him in college because he was too poor and now their 20th high school reunion is coming up and he wants to exact revenge... well, now you’ve got something.

Also keep in mind that the greater the obstacle, the more impossible it is to overcome, the higher the stakes. If Bob wants to buy a big house and join a country club, why doesn’t he just get a loan from the bank? Could it be that Bob has tried and doesn’t qualify? Or perhaps Bob doesn’t know how to read or write and filling out a loan application is impossible?

Dramatic Action: *What the character does to get what he wants.*

In this case, Bob desperately needs money. What does he do to get it? He kidnaps Bill and holds him for ransom. NOTE: **Do not confuse “action” with “activity.”** We get a lot of plays where the characters are washing the dishes or perhaps driving a car. These alone are not examples of dramatic action – they are merely activities in which the characters are engaged. Think of dramatic action as the WHY behind the activity – for example, if your character is driving a car in order to escape capture after robbing a bank, *that* is dramatic action. Notice once again that **high stakes are involved.**

Cause and Effect

The idea here is to create dramatic action, which leads to dramatic conflict, which leads to more dramatic action, which leads to more conflict, etc. all the way to the resolution at the end of the play.

Another great bit of advice that has always stood me in good stead applies here as well:

“Remove all random coincidence.”

Nobody just happens into a room. Nobody just happens to bump into each other. If two people bump into each other, it’s because they both need to be in a certain place desperately and their paths collide.

4) Dialogue

What people say to each other in a heightened situation. The crux of playwriting. The story we are watching evolves out of what people say to each other. **Here are a couple pitfalls to avoid.**

1) ***Casual language.*** Words and phrases such as “I think” or “really” or “just” or “maybe” can really lower the stakes. Look at the following line of dialogue from our hostage story:

BOB: I really think I might just blow your head off if I don’t get that money.

Now let’s remove the “casual.”

BOB: Give me the money or I’ll blow your head off.

More succinct, more active, more exciting.

2) ***Exposition.*** And what I mean by “exposition” is this: necessary information delivered to the audience by a character in a form which is not derived from the character’s need to tell it. Here’s an example:

EXPOSITION

BOB: I need this money to buy a house and join a country club. You see, my high school sweetheart dumped me because I was poor. I was broken hearted. My life was ruined. Now our high school reunion is coming up and I want to show her how wrong she was about me.

NON-EXPOSITION:

BILL: Please let me go. Look, here's all the money in my wallet. You can have it. You can have whatever you want...

BOB: You don't got what I want.

BILL: Maybe I do.

BOB: Where do you live? Huh?

BILL: In Brooklyn.

BOB: No, I mean what kind a house you got?

BILL: I don't own a house. I live in a studio apartment.

BOB: See what I mean? I don't need no studio apartment. I gotta have a house. A big house! A mansion! And I gotta join a country club!

BILL: You're holding a gun to my head because you want to buy a house and play golf? That doesn't make any sense!

BOB: That's cuz you never met Sheila. You don't know what it's like to be with her... to love her... to be dumped by her – dumped just because I was *poor*. But I'll show her. Next week's our twentieth reunion. We'll see who's rich. We'll see who's on top now. And when she begs me to take her back... forget about it.

Can you see the difference between the two? In the second scenario, Bob *had* to tell Bill about Sheila in order to justify his behavior. The same information has been given to the audience, but in a much more active way. In other words, a playwright's job is...

“...translating everything the audience needs to know into something the character needs to say.”

5) Resolution

How does it end? There are no hard and fast rules to this one. Sometimes the character gets what he wants, sometimes he doesn't – but it has to end. Does Bob get his money? Does Bob get arrested? Does Bill wrestle Bob to the ground after revealing he is Sheila's husband?

“As usual in all the arts, formulas never work: **the best ending in any play is one that rises organically out of the characters and their actions.**

There are, however, some strategies that have persisted from back in Shakespeare's time, by which authors have come to successful conclusions.”

~ Conrad Geller

FIVE TYPICAL ENDINGS (by Conrad Geller)

1. **Epilogue:** either a spokesperson for the author or one of the characters steps forward to make a final comment.

2. **Song:** a distinguishing characteristic of the American Musical Comedy genre. It can be a person or people singing lyrics, or a bit of music reprised from an earlier moment in the show.

3. **Triumph or Catastrophe:** puts plot at the center of the drama. Rising action all the way to the end might be best if a character must finally reveal him or herself in a violent outburst, as in many murder mysteries, or when the falling action is obvious or unimportant. The best modern use of the climactic ending is probably in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Elizabeth Proctor, having failed to get her husband to save his life by compromising his integrity, experiences a peculiar mixture of both triumph and catastrophe:

“He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him.”

4. **Life Goes On:** “That’s the way it is, and that’s the way it’s going to be,” The plot and the resolution of personal conflicts are less important than the ambiance of the play itself.

Perhaps the best model for the Life Goes On ending is in Thornton Wilder’s monumental *Our Town*. The Stage Manager’s comments throughout have formed a backdrop and antiphony for the action, and he plays the final coda:

“Most everybody’s asleep in Grover’s Corners. There are a few lights on: Shorty Hawkins, down at the depot, has just watched the Albany train go by--(to the audience) Hm . . . Eleven o’clock in Grover’s Corners--You get a good rest, too. Good night.”

5. **Setting It All to Rights** was Shakespeare’s favorite ending, especially in the tragedies and histories. Typically, an authority figure comes to the middle of the stage to reward the faithful and punish the guilty.