feel you need to tell your audience what to think. Just show them why to think it.

- If you can show it, there's no need to talk about it.
- Try not to telegraph the ending of your play too early. If we can figure out the ending too quickly, we miss the fun of taking the journey.
- You must be certain that the ending of the play resolves itself in a way that is believable. I'm all for twist/surprise endings, but make sure that the action of your play earns it. There is nothing more frustrating for an audience member than to see a play with an ending that's not justified. They'll feel duped, that they wasted their ten minutes.
- Every detail you've set up in the course of your ten-minute play must come together and pay off at the end; otherwise your audience will feel shortchanged.

**Getting Your Ten-Minute Play Performed**

- I've read in several ten-minute play guidelines that the play should be between 1500 and 1700 words. I'm not quite sure if that's always the case, but it should give you a sense of what some theaters expect, and can be used as a gauge.
- Keep stage directions to a minimum. They take up valuable space in your script.
- Keep your props and costumes to a minimum.
- Keep your set simple. You don't want to create an elaborate set that requires time to set up and break down. Remember, ten-minute play festivals want to be able to move smoothly and quickly from one play to the next.
- Try not to have too many technical requirements for your play (i.e., sound, light cues, etc.). Remember, your play is just one of many in an evening of ten-minute plays. The lighting and sound designers need to do many evenings' worth of cues. Try not to overburden them with too many cues for just your play. Too many cues could prevent your play from being selected for production.
- Make sure your play is ten minutes long. Before you send out any ten-minute play, have several readings of it to be sure it's ten minutes; end of story!

### Chapter 3

**Before Beginning Your Ten-Minute Play**

If you've never written a play of any kind, writing a ten-minute play can be a great way to start. If you've written plays before, but have never written a ten-minute play, this book can be a lesson in learning how to condense and tell stories in a concise manner.

In the next couple of chapters I'll be discussing writing the ten-minute play from my experience. I am in no way saying that my way is the only way to write a ten-minute play. Every playwright, every artist, creates in his or her own particular way. First I'll tell how I write ten-minute plays, and then later in the book you'll see how other playwrights write theirs.

**Perking with an Idea**

All plays begin with an idea, a topic, an issue, a story line, a line of dialogue, or even an image that engages your mind. Perhaps you've had an idea for a piece and don't yet know how you want to express it. Sometimes it's better not to do anything for a while. Just let it percolate (“perk”). Many artists talk about an initial gestation period before they do any actual work on a new piece. This is different from a delay tactic for avoiding work. By ruminating you allow your subconscious mind to collect the necessary information for you. Think of the process as the work of little elves who magically know how to gather and organize the material you've been looking for. Let them do the work for you. You'll find these elves even more helpful later on if you get stuck.

Speaking of getting stuck, this can happen at any time while working on a play. When I find myself stuck when beginning or while working on
any new play, I generally put the play away for a period of time and focus on other things, letting those elves figure out how I can get "unstuck." It always amazes me how, when I come back to that same play with a fresh mind, the problems, the block, seems to disappear and the solution seems apparent. There is an aha moment and I feel unstuck.

So when you feel ready to start, when the idea has perked—start, and let the writing move at its own pace.

Also, you may want to look at your dreams and keep a journal during this time.

Deciding When to Begin

The right time to begin writing your ten-minute play is when you feel ready, motivated. Before starting, make sure you have enough time to create and explore. If you have an appointment in an hour, now may not be the best time. You want to feel relaxed, not rushed.

Beginning means sitting in front of your computer or taking out that writing pad and seeing what comes to you. Whether you write on a computer or initially on a notepad is up to you. For many years I wrote my plays out longhand. Then, when they were at a developed place, I'd type them out on the computer. These days I go right to the computer and start.

You don't have to begin with characters speaking dialogue. As a matter of fact, you can start by recording any thoughts of frustration that you may be feeling sitting there. Write it! (See "Free Writing" and "Clustering," next chapter.) Whatever blockage you may be feeling, express it in words. Thoughts like "Damn it, this isn't working!" or "I have nothing to say!" or whatever's going through your mind at the moment, put it down on paper or type it on your computer.

Sometimes a line of dialogue, something you heard someone say that day, or even an image is all you need to begin. Write down whatever it is and see if it conjures up something more for you. Perhaps the character who is saying that particular line will start to take shape in your imagination. Maybe you'll get a sense of the type of person who's saying this line. Or you may see an image, a face, even a person you know or knew.

After writing down that initial line, you want to get a response to that line from another character. Again, let your imagination take over; don't try to "figure out what should come next." Trust your instincts and let'er rip. Jot down the response line; see where that takes you. Hopefully what follows is an entire riff or sequence of dialogue, opening up the play for you. Just go with it. Write the lines down and keep out of the way.

If nothing else seems to follow that first line, just leave it on the page and come back to it when something does. There's no need to pressure yourself or force something when nothing's coming. The impetus, the idea may open up at another time when your imagination is ready to move forward with your play. Or it may start filling in when you're doing something entirely different, like washing the dishes or jogging. I'll say more about the way I allow a first line to lead me into a play, and about dealing with writer's block, later on. (See "Techniques for Dealing with Writer's Block When Starting a Play")

The Actor and the Playwright

Generally, actors interpret and perform what a playwright has written. The actor's creative life involves constant collaboration with other artists (the director, other actors, etc.) early on in a play's production. The writer starts out creating alone; only after completing a play does he or she collaborate with the play's production team (producer, director, actors, etc.). Yet the interconnectedness of both professions should be obvious. The most evident similarity between the actor and the writer is that both are creative artists, and both use their imagination in their work. We'll be looking at techniques that draw on these key characteristics and merge both of these professions in writing your ten-minute play.

As an Actor, Do I Have the Skills Necessary to Create My Own Material?

I personally feel that almost anyone can write, tell stories, and maybe even write plays. If you've had experiences, you have stories like no one else's. Your stories are unique, yours alone. How you'll tell your stories is as individual as you. Your imagination is also unique to you.

A few years ago I was a mentor at the Edward Albee Theatre Conference (now called the Last Frontier Theatre Conference) in Valdez, Alaska. There was a play that year, very imaginative and deeply moving, that stood out. It was written by a fourteen-year-old girl who had never seen a play. She had read only one or two plays in her whole life. But this play was
something she wanted, needed to write. The results were magical. She wrote not just a good play, but a great play.

Actors have an advantage over many first-time playwrights, since acting in plays means you are constantly reading plays and probably know more than you think about structure, dialogue, format. Once you begin writing a play of your own, you may find that you know "instinctively" what to do. And there's no reason why you as an actor can't take a playwriting class or two, whether to bolster your knowledge or your confidence in what you may already know.

Fear of Writing

There is always the fear that if you expose yourself in your writing, your audience will sit in judgment of you and your life. This is true of all artists, including actors. You can't be too preoccupied by this. You can never second-guess an audience, so why waste time worrying about the people you're writing for? If you honestly find that you have something to say that is engaging, interesting, or funny to you, put it down on paper or type it on the computer. You may be surprised to find that it will resonate for others, too.

Working Internally as an Actor and as a Writer

Many actors in America are trained in internal or psychological acting techniques. The Actors Studio, using the "method technique," bases a great deal of the work on the actor's personal life and inner responses to the character he or she is working on. Any of the many books by Constantin Stanislavski about "the system" (which later became known as "the method"), or acting books by Lee Strasberg or Stella Adler, offer excellent exercises that actors and writers may find helpful in developing characters for their ten-minute plays. After using some of the method techniques and exercises, you can combine what you discover with some improvisation work and imagination. By using your own memories, and then adding your imagination to the stew, you can create all sorts of characters in interesting situations. Writers working this way aren't working just conceptually, but from inner experiences and memories.

Improvisation is a great way to free your imagination and develop plays. Many actors are already adept at improvisation, so this way to develop your scripts might be an easy stepping-stone from acting to playwriting. British film director Mike Leigh is well known for developing his films (Naked, Life Is Sweet, and others) by working improvisationally with the actors and developing the script from their improvisations. Playwright Jeffrey Sweet is a big advocate of developing plays improvisationally. If you'd like to explore working this way on your ten-minute plays, check out his books, Something Wonderful Right Away: An Oral History of the Second City and Solving Your Script: Tools and Techniques for the Playwright.

Sometimes our creativity feels like a blocked exhaust pipe. And the harder we try to force the smoke out, the worse it seems to get. We are plagued with doubts and negative thoughts such as "Who's going to care about this?" "Am I, is it, really good enough?" All artists deal with doubts all the time. I'm sure that you've dealt with them as an actor. Eventually you learn to live with creative doubts. You'll realize that self-censoring and insecurities are just part of the creative process.

One solution to the problem of writer's block is to realize that to get "there" (wherever it is you're hoping to go, creatively) you have to start with "here." And "here" is the room that you're in, with nothing on that paper. You have to allow and accept the present moment. "Okay, I'm blocked, I've got nothing." Use that as the launching pad and see if that admission gets the motor going.

An image that's been used to describe being creatively blocked is that of rocks in front of a cave. It may feel as if huge boulders are blocking your way into some magical creative cave. If only I could get behind those rocks, you think, I just know there's some good creative stuff inside that cave. Sometimes those rocks blocking the creative entrance way are, themselves, pure creative gold, the very stuff you've been looking for. But you didn't realize it, couldn't see their value. They are the starting point! What I'm saying is start where you are. Start in the exact moment/place of your frustration or anger. What does that feeling do to you? What does it look like, how does it sound? Put it into words, write it down, put it into the characters you're trying to create.

Techniques for Dealing with Writer's Block

Some writers, when experiencing writer's block, say that just writing anything, even copying a page out of a book, can help them get back into the groove of writing.
Some playwrights, when feeling blocked, go out and see another playwright’s work. They say that just being in a theater and seeing good material can be quite inspiring.

Keeping a pad with you at all times to jot down a thought or line of dialogue can also be helpful (or keep notes on your iPad, smartphone, etc.). An idea may come to you during any part of your day—while walking, on a bus, in the shower, anywhere. One strong thought or image or some great line of dialogue can be just the trigger that will get you started.

After actually starting a play, I know of some playwrights that end each day’s work in the middle of a sentence or thought. When they return the next day they can pick up the thread of where they left off and not have to look at an empty page.

Freewriting

Freewriting is a great way to get started writing a new ten-minute play. Several playwrights I spoke with said that on occasion it’s helped them get over a bad case of writer’s block. Freewriting is a method by which you put your pen to paper and write nonstop for at least ten minutes. It’s a method for generating new ideas. With this method you allow ideas to lead you (rather than the other way around). When it’s working well, one idea will ignite another. This method is about quantity, not quality. It’s about first thoughts, impulses, anything that comes to mind. Quite often we squelch our impulses. This exercise helps you free yourself from that tendency.

Eleven Rules of Freewriting

1. Write as quickly as you can.
2. Write without boundaries.
3. Don’t stop to censor or revise anything.
4. Don’t stop to figure out what you’ve written; don’t analyze it.
5. Don’t attempt to think or get logical about the words you’ve written.
6. Don’t pay any attention to spelling, grammar, or punctuation.
7. Write all over the page. Don’t be concerned about margins or even the lines on the page.
8. If you can’t think of anything to write, then write about that.
9. Don’t cross out anything you’ve written.
10. Even if something comes up for you that is embarrassing, painful, or frightening, write it down.
11. Take a sentence from what you’ve written, put it on the top of a page, then write for ten minutes about that sentence, using it as a topic sentence.

Benefits of Freewriting

Freewriting instills discipline. It’s a productive way to work through fears and anxieties about creating new material. Some writers use this method as a daily warm-up exercise before starting work on their piece. Or, when you’re working under pressure, it can jump-start you into your day’s work. Freewriting is a useful tool that can give you ideas and help you learn to write effortlessly, more spontaneously. It can help to turn off that self-censoring device that can be destructive, especially in the early stages of starting a play.

After You’ve Completed the Freewriting Session

Remember, this exercise is about process, not product. After you’ve done your freewriting session, look through the material to see if there is anything that you can use (a word, a phrase, some dialogue) for the play that you’re about to get started on or are presently working on. If there is, save it. Then immediately get rid of the rest of the freewriting work that you’ve done. The reason you do this is that sometimes there’s a tendency to want to revise what you already have on the page, using it as a first draft. That’s not the idea of this exercise. It’s not a first draft; it’s the starting point for what will (hopefully) become your new play.

Clustering (or Webbing): Finding the Initial Core of Your Work

Following the freewriting exercise, I suggest another excellent exercise called "clustering." Clustering is a very popular writing method that was created by Gabriele Lusser Rico and discussed in her book Writing the Natural Way, an excellent book for writers. Her technique helps you focus
on what you're trying to say in your work. It utilizes the right side of the brain's ability to organize information. Sometimes when we start out on a new piece it may be difficult to determine which areas of our work we need to focus on. Clustering helps you to find the through line to your work. It helps you to zero in when too many thoughts and ideas seem to blur your creative landscape. Ironically it's also useful when there's a lack of ideas. Like freewriting, which it's similar to, this technique helps you to bypass your conscious mind and get to your unconscious. The best way to describe clustering is "total free association" or "brainstorming."

How to Cluster

Start this exercise with a fresh sheet of paper. Write a word that is somehow connected to the ten-minute play that you're about to start work on. Don't be concerned about which word you choose; whatever word comes to mind will be fine. If you don't have a play in mind, any word that comes to mind is the one to start with.

- Place the word in the middle of the page. Circle the word. Look at it for a moment. This core word or nucleus is the jumping-off point for the exercise.
- Now, as quickly as you can, allow yourself to free-associate around your nucleus word: write whatever thoughts, words, images, or phrases come to you, uncensored, as many as you can. Each new word or phrase that you write down should radiate out from the nucleus word.
- Draw circles around each new word or phrase. Use each one as a new starting point to which you link further related ideas, phrases, bits of dialogue, etc., as they arise in your mind. You can add arrows indicating direction if you wish.
- If nothing spills out, doodle, putting arrows on your existing cluster. The doodling allows your hand to keep moving and may allow for possible associations.
- Don't waste time trying to analyze anything: just go with your gut feelings. Don't stop until you have exhausted all possibilities. Keep going until you feel the need to write something. This shift will come in a thought like "I've got it! I know what I want to write!"
- Most writers work with clusters for up to a few minutes. When you feel compelled to write, start immediately! Don't allow your inhibitions to hold you back. Free-associate, write with abandon, let your imagination go. Start writing as fast as you can.
- If nothing particular inspires you to write, then look at the words or phrases in the cluster and select any one of them. Start writing about that word or phrase. It may give rise to dialogue, images, or even new plot ideas. Keep writing for at least ten minutes if you can. You can refer back to the cluster if you wish.
- Remember, there is no right or wrong here. This is only an exercise. Don't force it.

Starting Your Play with an Outline

Some playwrights like to start their plays with an outline. The outline can serve as a sort of skeletal script, giving the writer a sense of direction for the piece. They start off with a cast of characters. Then they invent ways for these characters to interact at different points in their lives. Hopefully a plot emerges out of these interactions.

Some playwrights' outlines are only a paragraph long, while others go on for pages. With a ten-minute play, the outline will obviously be much shorter than for a full-length. I've written a few ten-minute plays using outlines. It's not my favorite way to work, but it has worked. I know many playwrights that only work this way. I personally like to let my subconscious imagination run wild when starting new plays. I don't care for any preset ideas or borders. But whichever way works for you is the way to go. You might try both ways: start with an outline if you like, and then try freewriting.

Comparing Processes for Actors and Playwrights

Actors generally come to a first read of a new play with no preconceived ideas of who their character will be, or how they will go about creating him or her. It's a very vulnerable time in an actor's creative process. It's a time of taking in, reading the script, digesting information, and then preparing to respond creatively to what you've read.

After that initial reading of the play, you have feelings and ideas about the character you are about to create. Creative juices are flowing; the imagination is at work. Starting with some initial impulses, you begin thinking of ways of ways to create your new character.
At the beginning of writing a new play, you, the writer, are opening a door for yourself. From the very first lines you write, you are taking yourself somewhere, although you may not be quite sure where yet. The more spontaneous you can allow yourself to be, the more personal and original your work will be. In this way, both the actor and the writer begin at the same place. It's a place of unknowing. It can be a frightening moment or an exciting one, like the moment just before you board a roller coaster. Trust yourself and let the ride surprise you!

Chapter 4

Playwriting Basics

As you write your ten-minute play, you will find it useful to know certain basic points of playwriting. I believe that the information in this chapter will be especially helpful to those who have never written a play before, although experienced playwrights may find it informative, too. What follows are some rules that apply to all plays, long and short.

- **Conflict**—Conflict is the essence of a play. The stronger the conflict, the more engaging your play will be. Character one wants something. Character two will do everything in his or her power to block character one from getting it. When that happens, we have conflict. Weak conflicts make for boring plays. Make the stakes high and you have a good chance of creating an engaging play.

- **Character**—Characters are the people who populate your play. Their personalities, their history, and their desires are expressed in the dialogue; i.e., what the characters say to each other. Your characters want something; in acting terms that's called "intention." Actors are taught that by discovering what the character needs you'll discover how you might play the character. The way the characters speak, what their lives are like, their family, and most importantly what they want, should all be taken into account when making playing choices.

- **The Protagonist**—This is the main character we will be following in your play, the one who wants something and runs into a conflict in attempting to get it. As in life, not all protagonists get what they want. Sometimes they discover that the pot of gold they've desperately been seeking is not at all what they thought it would be. It's how the character evolves in the play that is most interesting, the journey, so to speak. The character should be different at the end of
the play than at the beginning. The knowledge the protagonist gains during the play changes him or her. The challenges, the obstacles that the protagonist overcomes (or doesn't) help to determine how he or she will change. Self-awareness comes from overcoming or attempting to overcome the challenges and obstacles.

- **The Antagonist**—To create conflict you must have an antagonist, or opposing force: something or someone must get in the way of the protagonist, blocking his or her path toward the goal. The antagonist can be another character in the play, an event, or an obstacle confronting the protagonist. The two forces going up against each other create the conflict in the play. The stronger the conflict of these two opposing forces, the more interesting your play will be.

- **Stage Directions**—These are the instructions a playwright includes in the script to let the actors and the director know what action is occurring during the scene. The best advice I can give is to use them as little as possible. Just include specific actions that must be addressed to make the play work efficiently. Some playwrights include way too many stage directions; save that for your screenplays.

- **Setting**—This is where and when your play takes place. It may include the furniture you must have in the scene or a doorway or window if needed. The setting may also be an indicator of the style of the play you're writing. Remember that this is theater, and try to keep it simple. Don't create scenes or sets that are not stage worthy. Some beginning writers create elaborate sets and scenes that might work better in film than on the stage. Again, with the ten-minute play, less is more. If your play is part of a ten-minute play festival, having too much furniture will impede moving on to the next play after yours is over. On some occasions plays have not been selected, or are eliminated from ten-minute play festivals, because of their set requirements.

### Aristotle's Poetics

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) wrote two books on aesthetics: *The Poetics* and *Rhetoric*. *The Poetics* is the earliest work of dramatic theory and originally addressed both comedy and tragedy, though the book on comedy has been lost. The surviving book deals with tragedy, which Aristotle felt was the “most refined version of poetry dealing with lofty ideals.”

While the following information on dramatic theory is highly condensed, it may serve as a starting point for those who wish to read further; and I believe some of this information may be of use in creating your ten-minute play.

Aristotle believed tragedy should be mimetic (a good imitation), serious, and a good length; that it should contain rhythm and harmony; and that the rhythm and harmony should appear in various combinations as the story evolved. He believed that tragedy was meant to be performed, not narrated, and that through catharsis it should purge feelings of pity and fear that had been aroused earlier in the telling of the story.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle said that unified plot structure is formed like a triangle. It begins with the *protais*, or the introduction, in the lower left-hand corner of the triangle. The highest point of the triangle is called the *epita*, or middle, which is the crisis, and in the lower right-hand corner of the triangle is the resolution of the conflict, which he called the *catastrophe*.

Aristotle broke down tragedy into six elements: plot, character, thought, diction, melody and spectacle.

- **Plot**. The plot should have a beginning that isn’t a consequence of any previous action, a middle that grows logically from the beginning, and an end that logically flows from the middle and from which “no further action should necessarily follow.” All the scenes in a play should be linked together by “probability and necessity.”

- **Character**. The character supports the plot; in other words, the characters’ personal motivation will impact the cause and effect chain of action. These events should create “pity and fear in the audience.” The protagonist, who Aristotle felt should be well respected and wealthy, changes due to “a great error” or “a frailty in his character.” Each character in a play should have a distinct personality, age, appearance, beliefs, socioeconomic background, and language.

- **Thought**. While Aristotle doesn’t explain what he means by this term, he does say that “speeches should reveal character.”

- **Diction** is “the expression of the meaning in words” that are proper and appropriate to the plot, characters, and end of the tragedy. Here Aristotle discusses the stylistic elements of tragedy, particularly metaphor. The ability to use metaphors, he believed, implied “an eye for resemblance” that was crucial in dramatic art.

- **Melody**. Aristotle saw the chorus as an actor in the play that should be fully integrated into the story.

- **Spectacle** is everything that is seen and heard during the play: costumes, scenery, and even special effects. Aristotle felt however, that
it was the job of the playwright, and not the stage machinist, to move the audience to emotion.

Freytag's Pyramid

Gustav Freytag (1816–1895), a German critic and novelist, modified Aristotle's triangle, adding two additional elements. The first was the complication, which is a rising action, ascending from the lower left-hand corner to the higher middle of the triangle. The falling action he placed descending from the highest middle to the lowest right-hand corner of the triangle. He used all five elements to analyze the structure of drama, calling them dramatic arcs. Freytag's pyramid can be useful as a guide while you're working on any plays of any length.

Freytag's Five Dramatic Arcs

- **Introduction (or Exposition)**—This is when we first meet the characters of the play. It's when the protagonist and antagonist are introduced and the play's conflict begins to reveal itself. We see where the play takes place, and the time and mood of the piece. During this initial arc we get some sense of how the characters interconnect in the play.

- **Rising Action**—During this arc things start to perk. The conflict becomes more apparent, and at this point we should be feeling the tension. Obstacles may appear, further blocking the protagonist from his goal.

- **Climax**—This is the point in the play where things dramatically change. Depending on the play you've written, they can get better or worse. This is the highest point in the pyramid.

- **Falling Action**—A resolution begins to appear in the conflict between our protagonist and antagonist. Generally the protagonist will either win or lose to his or her foe in this dramatic arc. It is here that we see that the climax or the main action is over and the story of the play starts to come to its conclusion.

- **Conclusion**—Sometimes called the catastrophe, this arc is the end of the play's story. In some plays the protagonist achieves his or her goal, as so often happens in comedies. When this doesn't happen, then quite often what we have is a tragedy. The conflict that we set up should now be resolved.

Chapter 5

Script Format

Up to this point in the book we've been looking at exercises to stimulate ideas and touched on classic playwriting structure theory. As the following chapters take you through the actual writing of your ten-minute play, it will be helpful to know the preferred format for theatrical scripts.

Below is the proper format for your ten-minute play. Some playwrights use the format they see in play anthology books. This is not the correct format for your plays.

- Your title page should be formatted correctly (see sample page). Make sure the title of your play is centered and all in caps. Beneath that you want to identify it as a ten-minute play (not in caps). Your name should be below that (unless you are submitting to a competition that requests that you leave your name off the script and place it instead on a separate information page).

- The dialogue in your play begins 1.5 inches from the left side of your page.

- Character names are always in caps.

- Any stage actions are indented 3 inches from the left and should be enclosed in parentheses.

- The dialogue of your play should be single-spaced.

- Use capital letters to bring the reader's attention to special design effects, such as sound and lights. For example: LIGHTS: Bright sunlight shines through the kitchen window.

- Directions for actors—i.e., specific instructions you'd like the actor playing the role to follow—should be placed directly below the character's name, in parenthesis. For instance, (Crying) or (Loudly).

- If a character's speech begins at the end of one page with just one line and continues onto the next page, it's best to move the entire
speech to the next page. If there is more than one line on the first page of the speech, you simply write out on the next page the character’s name again, and write “continued,” in parentheses. This will look like JOHN (continued).

- Generally, most playwrights use a 12-point font. Some playwrights like to use Courier New, but most use Times New Roman.
- All pages should be numbered. I like to place numbers at the bottom of the page in the center. The title page should not be numbered. If you must have a separate page for the time, place, and character information, make sure that that page is not numbered, either. With ten-minute play contests, if some play readers see a script that says 12 pages, they won’t even open it to see that the title page and info page are part of that number. Begin your page numbers with the first page of dialogue.
- If you are a Dramatists Guild member, you can include their logo on the title page on the bottom left-hand side.

© Year Your Name

(Copyright, which credits the playwright with legal ownership of his or her play, exists from the moment of the work’s creation. The notice above may be used without registering your work with the U.S. Copyright Office; however, registration provides certain legal benefits; see www.copyright.gov.)
(Sample Format for Character, Time and Place Page
From my play The Danger of Strangers)

CAST OF CHARACTERS
HE—An attractive man in his thirties or early forties. Friendly and outgoing.

SHE—An attractive woman in her thirties or early forties. She is friendly and polite fully seductive.

TIME
The present, a hot August afternoon, lunchtime.

PLACE
The living room of a one-bedroom apartment in the West 50s overlooking Ninth Avenue in New York City. Bright sunlight is shining in from a window.

(An attractive man and woman are sitting opposite each other, just finishing their coffee. A small coffee table separates them. He's sweating but trying not to show it. She, on the other hand, doesn't seem to notice the heat at all.)

SHE: More?

HE: Hm?

SHE: Coffee.

HE: No, thanks.

SHE: Sure?

HE: Yeah?

SHE: You sure?

HE: Uh-huh.

A wink in his voice.

But I am tempted.

SHE: Are you?

HE: You are tempting me.

SHE: (Slightly coy) Am I?

HE: (Leaning in a bit) C'mon, you know you are.

SHE looks down at her coffee cup, lifts it to her lips, takes a sip. He watches her, then smiles.

SHE: What's so funny?

HE: Funny?

SHE: You're smiling.

HE: (Playing with her) Am I?
Chapter 6

Beginning Your Ten-Minute Play

Now that we've looked at a variety of ways to get started writing your ten-minute play, you may have some opening lines of dialogue, or a strong image. Or perhaps you're beginning from some sense of what you want your play to be about, or some idea of the characters you want to create. Or you may have created an outline for the play.

If you're working from an outline, don't feel that you must stick to it strictly as you progress with the play. Allow things to meander or evolve in any way they wish. If the characters go off in a different direction than you originally thought they would, go with them. Surprising yourself as you go along can be a thrilling creative experience. Outlines are starting points, road maps. But you can always take the road in another direction if you feel it would work better for your play.

About the only thing I'm thinking when I start out is that I'd like to write a ten-minute play. I may have a line of dialogue or a strong image or idea. But I have no idea what it will be about, or who the characters are. I'm open to anything and enjoy surprising myself. On some occasions, the play ends up turning into a one-act or a full-length. However it evolves, I let it write itself as much as I can, especially in the beginning.

How I Start My Ten-Minute Plays

As I mentioned, sometimes a line of dialogue is all I need to start a play. I may be on the subway, walking on the street, at the theater, etc., and I hear someone say something that I find interesting, a line that that somehow
resonates with me. If I can, I’ll jot it down for later. Something on the news can pique my interest. I hear someone say something about a situation they’re involved with, and I connect to the words they use.

Or, sometimes, while I’m sitting at my computer a line will come to my mind out of nowhere. That line may end up opening the new play—or it may not. Sometimes it’s just the trigger to get my imagination going.

Here are some examples of what I’m referring to from ten-minute plays I’ve written:

- “You’re kidding, he said that?” This was the line that opened my ten-minute play Coulda-Woulda-Shoulda. The response to the line was “That’s what he said, this morning when I was giving him his bath.” From that first line and the response line, a play began for me about an overprotective mother and the problems this characteristic created between her and her husband. I allowed the opening dialogue to trigger my imagination and off I went, allowing the characters to just speak to each other.

- Another line that started one of my plays (After) was “My God, that was . . . !” The other character simply said, “What?” and then the first person said, “Eloquent!” For me that triggered something and the play began. The first speaker, a woman, is addressing a stranger she’s just met at a funeral home, telling him how moved she was by his speech about the deceased. But I had no idea when I wrote that first exchange that I would use it in that way. In my imagination I wasn’t sure where the conversation was taking place, and then somehow I pictured these two people standing in a funeral home, and that began the story of the play for me.

- In Goin’ Round on Rock Solid Ground, the first line is “So?” And the other character says, “What?” The first character says “Tell me; tell me!” The second character then says, “Tell you what!” The eagerness of these two men gave me an idea about their relationship. I saw it taking place in a furnished basement—where I ultimately discovered that these two paranoid, lowlife guys were anxiously waiting a drug dealer.

- In The Pain in the Poetry, the line that kicked off the play was “I wrote a play.” The other character, who is seated, looks up and says, “Hm, what?” The first character then says, “I said, I wrote a play!” The next character replies, “That’s nice dear, did you feed the dog?” Something in that dialogue kicked in an image for me. I saw the second character sitting in a rocking chair, sewing. The play was

about a timid husband confessing to his controlling wife that he’s secretly been writing a play for the last two years without her knowledge. Once again, I just let the characters continue speaking, I tried not to edit anything at this point. Whatever they wanted to say to each other was just fine with me.

What I’m trying to show with these examples is how I came to discover the thread for a play by simply starting with one line leading into another. Just as readers discover a book or play as they read it, I often discover my plays as I write them. It’s very spontaneous. I enjoy not knowing where I’m going—until I do. There is the freedom that anything can happen and anything can be said at any moment. In fact, the dialogue that initially starts off a play may even be removed later on. Down the line you’ll do rewrites, rewrites, rewrites. Sometimes the opening lines remain where they are; other times they are slightly altered or moved; and sometimes they are completely cut out. As I discover the play I’m writing I also discover what must be said—and when. Especially in the case of the ten-minute play, where every line should move the plot along, I try not to get too attached to any particular line or moment.

In all of the above examples I had no idea where I was going until the lines, the conversation, gave me a clue as to “who” was saying them. For example, what starts off as a man speaking can easily turn into a woman speaking as the characters begin to appear in my imagination.

Starting a Play with an Idea, a Theme, or an Image

Another way I start plays is when a particular issue comes to my mind and affects me in some way. I remember when I saw Tony Kushner’s brilliant Angels in America. I left the theater high from the experience. Inspired by that brilliant play to write something about AIDS, I began two plays of my own the next morning. The first, Unfamiliar Faces, was about two gay men that realize that almost all their friends have died from the disease. It was a ten-minute play that went on to be an Actors Theatre of Louisville finalist.

I also started a second play, my first full-length, Nobody’s Flood. It was a play about a family in the 1980s, dealing with the son’s trying to hide the fact that he had AIDS. I’ve found that sometimes seeing other playwrights’ work can be a great source of inspiration. For some writers, seeing a beautiful painting or sculpture, or being moved by some piece of music, is all they need to launch a new play.
The news can be another source of inspiration for me. I've started plays right after seeing a person on the news speaking about some horrible injustice or predicament. I've written plays on abortion, racial injustice, the economy, etc., based on some news story that moved me. Some of these plays have been ten-minute plays; others needed a larger canvas and became one-acts or even full-lengths. Whatever subject or idea moves you, touches you, makes you angry, or makes you laugh may be the seed for your play. If you need to, let the idea perk until you feel you need to express it. Don't be too concerned about the details of the characters at the beginning—whether they're male or female, their ages, or even what their names are—just write what they have to say. Quite often, I start a play with numbers rather than character names: "1" speaks to "2" or "3." I can always fill in the names when they come to me (generally through their dialogue). Whatever the issue is, allow the characters to discuss, argue, or lament about it as long as they need. Cutting will come later. At the beginning let them be affected by the struggle of the subject.

Go to a museum or an art gallery. Allow other artists' paintings or sculptures to inspire you. Stephen Sondheim's brilliant musical *Sunday in the Park with George* was inspired by the painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* by George Seurat.

Personal issues, family conflicts, and unresolved real life incidents are quite often fodder for playwrights. The things we wanted to say, wish we had said, regret never saying, are often great starting points for plays. A great ten-minute play by Craig Lucas, called *What I Meant Was*, is one of my favorites. In this satiric play, members of a dysfunctional family say all the things they might have said if there was totally open communication. It's a raw, blisteringly funny play that shows what the truth looks like when there are no filters. It was a winner at the Actors Theatre of Louisville Humana Play Festival in the ten-minute play category and received a production there in 1996.

Probably some of the greatest advice I ever received about playwriting is "Write what you're afraid to write about." Once you open that door, it's amazing what can come out of you. Yes, it requires a certain amount of bravery, but believe me, the payoff for both you and your audience will be well worth it.

Chapter 7

The Next Steps

Intention, Objective, and Action

Once I start to get some sense of who my characters are, I also begin to get a sense of what they want. This is one of the most important moments of discovering what my play is actually about. Ask yourself early on in the writing of your play "What do my lead characters want?"

Actors are taught in acting classes that they must always know what their character wants (the objective). They are told to make it personal (the intention) and then go for it (the action). As writers, we have to supply actors with characters that have strong wants, or they won't have much to play. Simply put, the stronger the wants, the more the actor has to play.

To illustrate this important point: my objective now is to teach you, the reader, how to write a ten-minute play. I'm sitting at my computer trying to figure out the best ways I can communicate the meaning of this particular terminology to you. I am determined to find the right words (intention), and by choosing and writing these words that you're now reading, I hope to get this important aspect of writing a ten-minute play through to you (action).

When working on a ten-minute play you have to be certain that your main character has a strong need. All the other characters (and hopefully there aren't too many others in your ten-minute play), should also have needs that they may or (may not) fulfill. Because this is a ten-minute play, you want to make these character intentions obvious in (hopefully) the first two pages of your play. This is no time to mess around with a lot of exposition. Get to the point ASAP! Sometimes this means that you overwrite during your first draft. Write as much as you need to set the story in motion.
When it’s all there, no matter how many pages you have, then cut, cut, cut down to the bone, to the basics of the story you need to tell in ten pages. This is where the play actually begins. The trick is to cut just the fat from your storytelling, not the muscle. You must have a cohesive, strong, clear story from the get-go, with characters motivated by strong needs. As your characters interact, trying to have their needs met, you create the universe of your play and the story reveals itself.

The Setting and Time

Where you set the play will definitely influence the story you’re telling. If you set the play in a prison cell, your characters are going to have very different realities than they would if you placed them at a kitchen table.

The time of day, whether it’s two in the morning or two in the afternoon, will affect the characters’ behavior. There are different rhythms for different times of day or night.

Setting your play on a sweltering hot summer night, or a freezing cold day with little or no heat, will also affect how characters behave.

The Best Way to Tell Your Story: The Play’s Structure

Plays take several forms. They can be naturalistic and have a traditional structure (beginning, middle, and end) or they can tell a story in a nontraditional or nonlinear way. The story of your play and the characters’ interactions can guide you as to which form fits best. Initially you may want to allow your play to move in any direction (and form) that it wants. As it becomes clearer to you, you’ll have a better idea of how you want to tell the story. I have written plays that started off with a traditional structure and eventually called for a major rewrite, switching to a nonlinear structure. With a ten-minute play this isn’t too difficult an adjustment. Just make sure the structure of the completed draft is consistent so that your story comes through clearly.

Complications Arise

The story line in a ten-minute play should be more complicated than just the interaction of characters with strong needs. On the other hand, you don’t want to create complications in your story that are not resolvable in ten pages. Perhaps a minor character needs conflict with your lead character to increase the drama. Or perhaps you can introduce an event that will alter the path of the story that you’ve started with. The last thing you want is a play that is predictable, where the audience is ahead of you because your conclusion is so obvious. Of course, the event must be believable and make sense with the facts of your story up to that point. I have seen many short plays in which the playwright seemed to have thrown something in just for “effect,” and it didn’t seem truthful to the story as a whole.

Realizing and Developing the Story of the Play

For me, there is usually an aha point somewhere along the line, where I “really get” what my play is about. I realize what story I’m trying to tell and who these characters are. Following that realization, I start working to make the story clearer. I’ve come to know who my main character is and what exactly he or she wants. Generally the other character(s) in the play have to be part of the conflict that the lead character is trying to overcome. (When, say, the two characters in the play are both trying to overcome a major threat to earth, or a plague, or some scenario like that, the obstacle is the unseen.) In either case, I need to know what specifically is in the way of the protagonist getting what he or she wants (the obstacle). These elements are the foundation for the first draft of that ten-minute play.

Sometimes the more I plunge into the play, the more I become an active participant. I feel the feelings of the characters as they discover their challenges and try to overcome them. I identify with their conflict and feel their frustrations as they attempt to overcome them.

Perhaps it’s the actor in me, but I generally speak the dialogue as I write it, or right after I write it. I’m not sure if other playwrights do that. I know some writers can sit in a coffee shop and silently write their plays. I need to say the lines out loud, see how they feel. Sometimes I need to get up, move around, take the action that’s called for.

As I begin to speak and embody the words I write, the play takes off, and a very rough first draft starts to emerge. I’m still trying to get my characters fleshed out, see what their conflicts are, and figure out how they may resolve them. I constantly return to the opening dialogue and follow the trail of the play I’ve written so far. My mind becomes a bit more analytical as I make small “refinements” along the way; a word here or a line there. Anything that, in the moment, feels right. Sometimes it becomes apparent
that some dialogue needs to be placed earlier or later in the play, or maybe even removed as it no longer is necessary to tell the story. Reading through the play also helps me to ensure that all of the characters are necessary, and that all of them have a definite throughline.

You must always keep in mind that what you're writing is a ten-minute play, so everything must move the story forward. There is no line or moment or action that should digress for long enough to throw the story off track in even the slightest way. Once again, it's not only what must be said, but what must be said now! That said, don't confuse digression with a real change of direction. When the audience is ahead of you and can predict the outcome, you've lost their interest. Surprise yourself as you go along and you'll surprise them.

As you keep rereading what you've written and fine-tuning your work, you should see your creation emerge from an amorphous state into a defined, specific play.

**Actors Working on Their Plays**

Actors, since perhaps up until now you've only acted in plays, take this opportunity to act in your own play. While writing it, read it aloud. As you're reading, do your characters feel real to you? Do you understand what their intentions are? Can you feel the dynamic between your lead character and the other characters in your play? Start off reading only the words you've written so far, but then allow yourself (perhaps with some improvisation) to open up the dialogue where it feels necessary. Eliminate lines of dialogue that don't feel real. Feel free to immerse yourself as an actor in your play, playing all the roles. If you like, get up, move around as the characters; see how that feels. Stay concentrated, in the moment, and you'll see where things do and don't work. Here's where the actor in you starts to become the critic of your own play. Trust your actor's instincts to guide you as you observe what's working and what isn't.

See if you can feel the play moving towards its conclusion. If not, try to see where it veers off course.

**Ending the First Draft**

To me, the most important moments of my plays are the opening and closing moments. I feel that the opening moments give the audience a peek into a whole new world. The closing moment is like saying good-bye to that world. The ending of your play must always be earned by the story that precedes it. Playwriting is storytelling. It's as simple as "Once upon a time..." After you've opened the box, the story unfolds.

**Finding Your Title**

The title is the first thing readers discover about your play. It can be a metaphor about your play or something descriptive. Descriptive titles don't always resonate well and may even be somewhat boring. I personally prefer metaphoric titles. Metaphoric titles at their best hint at the theme of the play and can be very enticing to a reader. A metaphoric title can have a double meaning, which is especially effective after a reader has read your play and then reflects on it.

Your play's title may come from a line of dialogue, or a character's name, or from what you feel the play is about. It can come to you in a flash, or after some reflection on the theme of your play. It may come to you after you've finished writing the first or second draft. There's nothing wrong with changing titles as many times as you wish (before you send out the finished play). Most importantly, the title should communicate in just a few words some essence of what you feel your play is trying to say.

**After the First Draft**

The first draft of your play really is about discovery: discovering what the play is about, the story you're trying to tell. It may well run over ten pages as you allow the story room to unfold.

Once I've completed the first draft I sometimes just put it away. I want to come back to it fresh before I start any major rewrites. You may discover on a later read that ideas, moments, that you thought there were there, actually aren't there. What you thought was on the page may be still in your mind. Now you have another opportunity to make sure it's on the page.

Sometimes I find myself thinking about the play even when I'm not consciously working on it. I try to clear my mind and go on to other things. But then perhaps while I'm on the treadmill, having dinner, or even just out walking, a light will go on about some aspect of the play. Sometimes it's a word, or a line of dialogue, or it may be a plot point that I hadn't thought about. Or I'll have some epiphany that will shed light on what the play is
really about. It might mean that when I go back to working on the play I'll have to change major plot points, or eliminate an unnecessary character, or any one of a million other things. If the thought seems important enough, I might jot it down. Or, I might let it ferment in my mind until I actually get back to work on the play at my computer.

Neil Simon, in his book *Rewrites: A Memoir*, discusses coming back to a play after he's put it away for a while. He says, "When I take it out and reread it... what's good remains good, but what's bad jumps off the page and smacks me right across my ego."

Chapter 8

Reading the First Draft

After you've completed the first draft of your ten-minute play, check the following list and see if it helps you in tightening your script. You should refer to this guideline periodically, using it for subsequent revisions. Sometimes it helps to try to read the script anew, as if you hadn't written it. I know that seems a bit odd, but you can pretend you haven't read it before.

1. From the very first line, does the script engage you? The moment you feel disengaged, just mark the passage(s), then continue reading. Don't analyze or try to fix anything at this point.
2. Wherever you feel the play loses you (becomes too convoluted, confusing), mark the section.
3. Do you believe the characters? Do they seem fully realized? If not, at which point do you feel they lose you? Be as specific as you can; underline the line or moment.
4. Does the way each character speaks sound authentic? Mark the words or passages that sound false.
5. Are there any characters that seem too similar to other characters?
6. Do you care about these characters? Do they offend you, annoy you, seem too abrasive?
7. Are all of your characters in this draft necessary? Can any of them be combined, eliminated?
8. Do you feel at any point that there's too much narrative or exposition? Remember, with a ten-minute play too much exposition is a waste of space.
9. Do you notice any repetition in the dialogue, the same words or phrases being overused?