

SAMPLE

An Introduction to Dramatic Writing

Lesson Aim

Explain the nature and scope of dramatic writing in its broadest context.

INTRODUCTION

A genre is the pigeonhole into which your novel or story fits. It might be mainstream, romantic, action and so on. A genre is like a class, form, genus or kind. This course considers the dramatic writing genre.

Drama, from the Greek word for action, is the term used to describe a specific type of fiction that is represented in a performance. Drama tends to be performed on a stage by actors. Therefore, drama in a narrow sense tends to refer to a type of play, but the film and television industry also make dramatic productions. So whilst theatrical drama is intended to be performed by actors for an audience, dramas are also written to be read on the page.

Motivation

So now you know what dramatic writing is. However, we have to have the motivation to actually write. If you are doing this course, you have obviously considered being a writer for some time. You may already have written stories, poems, and so on but feel the need to look into this further. Do you want to write?

The desire to write is often borne from the need to express oneself. Whether there is an issue nagging at you that you would like to resolve, or you need a creative outlet, writing is a good way of processing the world around you. It is also a fantastic tool for non-violent conflict resolution.

There are many less honourable reasons for writing, for example, greed, seeking fame, etc.

One of the best reasons to write is that **you have a story that you must tell.**

Don't be put off if this isn't the case. Often the story may come to you slowly in random words and ideas and when you're lucky it's like a wave which washes over you and simply pours out of your fingers on to the page.

If you think for a few moments about the major turning points in your own life, you're sure to find more than one story that you must tell.

Typing Time

The time you spend typing up your story is only a miniscule amount compared to the overall time it takes you to write. Firstly, you have spent time thinking about your story, revising it in your head. You may then have written it down by hand. Then you are ready to type it. That's not it though, when you have typed it, you then have to draft and revise, and draft and revise some more. There are not many authors out there who will type up the "perfect" story first time. Many will have drafted their story over and over again until they feel it is perfect. Even then, most authors do not feel that they have it right.

Types of Writing

There are many different types of writing – short stories, poems, novels, screen plays etc. Dramatic writing can fall into all of these categories.

A short story usually takes place over a shorter period of time. It is often set in just one setting/scene, and the characters may be shown with broader strokes – there is not as much time to analyse characters as there is with novel writing.

A novel, however, allows more space to describe characters and scenes. There may be more than one scene and more than one plot. The plots may be multi-layered.

Writing comes in many guises, all of which can be creatively employed and manipulated by the writer regardless of the form (novel, poetry, travel guide, etc) in which she or he is writing.

Common elements of writing are:

a) Reflection

This is an internal process of reviewing and making meaning from one's own experience.

b) Exposition or Reporting

This covers a wide area of writing. Events, thoughts and situations are exposed or explained to the reader, as in textbooks, magazine articles, or news stories, but also when the narrator or a character takes an informing role. One very important form of reporting or exposition for writers is description.

c) Description

This is the reporting of information to convey an *impression* or feeling about a place, person, thing or idea, rather than facts. Description can be a small part of a particular narrative, or the main part of it. A lot of good travel writing is descriptive, as is a lot of fiction. Consider the heavy overlapping of description and exposition in the following description of a circus performer by E.B. White (not in one of her novels, but in a newspaper article):

The richness of the scene was in its plainness, its natural condition - of horse, of ring, of girl, even to the girl's bare feet that gripped the bare back of her proud and ridiculous mount. The enchantment grew not out of anything that happened ... but out of something that seemed to go round and round with the girl, attending her, a steady gleam in the shape of a circle ...

d) Explanation

This is the process of leading another person to a particular understanding or perception through information and reason, rather than through persuasive language. It includes instruction, rules and guidelines, argument and analysis.

e) Argument

This aims to persuade the reader to change their viewpoint or attitude about an idea or situation. It is often quite rhetorical in nature. [*Rhetoric* is the art of persuading through emotion, using elements of logic or reason (often quite illogically)]. Most political speeches are rhetorical in nature. Argument typically presents two points of view and then builds a case for one of them, and either refutes or overwhelms the other.

MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT WHAT TO WRITE

Decide on your Genre

You may enjoy reading certain types of books, you may have a story you are bursting to write. The genre is important. If you don't decide your genre at the beginning, you may end up going off on a tangent and writing a romantic comedy instead of the action thriller you were planning.

Genre is a word often used to describe categories or types of written text. Some of the more familiar genres of creative writing are:

- Poetry of all kinds
- Short stories
- Novels - including: westerns, romance, science fiction, detective stories, mysteries, fantasy, etc.
- Stage play scripts

- Film and television screenplays
- Lyrics.

Other genres that we may not think of as creative writing are:

- Magazine articles
- Newspaper feature stories
- Essays
- Biographies
- Advertisements
- Card greetings
- Books or articles on science, history etc.

Know Your Subject

Before writing your story, consider – do you know about the subject area that you wish to write about? Think about your motivation for writing. If you think - “I’d really like to write about wizards because J. K. Rowling made a fortune” but you know absolutely nothing about wizards or magic or mythology, then it might not be the right area for you.

Your first thoughts need to be – “What am I interested in?”, “What do I know about?”

If you don’t know much about wizards but really want to write about them and think you have a good story, then your next step is research.

This is an essential step for anyone who wishes to write. You may know a lot about what you want to write about. But there may also be some facts or essentials for the story that require you to carry out research.

The Concept

All novels start with the concept. A concept is there to keep the story in focus. It stops you as a writer from wasting time going off on a tangent or writing about characters that you finally realise you don’t need.

A concept is an idea of what the story is about. A concept is usually based around the idea of “What if....?” So, what if something were to happen to a certain character or at a certain time?

What if the president of the United States was kidnapped by aliens?

What would happen to society if no more children were born?

What would happen in the world if there was suddenly no sound?

But it does not need to be dramatic - it can be a simple idea about a person's life.

The book, ‘Carry Me Down’ by M.J. Hyland is a very dramatic book that uses the concept ‘a child struggles with adolescence, with tragic consequences’.

The concept should be around three lines long. It is important to have an effective concept – that is a concept that keeps your story focussed and is useful for telling others exactly what you are writing about. It should be a clear statement to help you sell your story.

Think of some concepts, for instance:

- Martians come from outer space. They take over the world. They are killed by the common cold. Recognise that? It’s ‘War of the Worlds.’
- Pretty, feisty young woman attracts man in higher class. They fight, but eventually he cannot resist her. ‘Pride and Prejudice.’

Do you get the idea? A concept that is fully developed tells us about the story, the main characters, their motivation, the plot, the climax and the resolution. Therefore, a concept must be fresh. It does not have to be original, just a new and original take on an old idea. Or it may be that you come up with a totally new and inspirational idea for your story. Whatever you come up with, your concept must be something that inspires you to write.

So you need a concept that you feel strongly about, in a genre that you can write about. If you don't have a concept the moment you feel a story, find one. We will look at concepts more in the assignments.

You're probably sitting there now thinking, "How do I get a concept?"

Try to catch those moments in your life when you question things. You might be reading an article about a crime and questioning the facts. You may have your own theories on what happened. You can fictionalise these things and write your own version of the events (just don't try to pass it off as the truth).

The best way to come up with these ideas and concepts is to allow yourself to daydream. Give yourself the freedom to imagine the world through someone else's eyes. And ask yourself the very same question, "What if...?"

The Synopsis

A synopsis is a summary of a finished story. It expands the information in the concept.

Try summarising your story in a few sentences:

(Insert story title) is a story about (insert main character's name) who wants _____
But (insert main problem)
In the end (insert climax and resolution summary)

A synopsis can then be used to create an outline.

Your outline should contain descriptions of dramatic action, scenes and sequences. In television script writing these key dramatic scenes are often called 'beats.' You can also call them plot points or turning points.

Call them what you like, they are the key dramatic moments in your story and should be placed into your outline. These should be the moments of engagement that will keep a reader interested and wanting to know what happens next.

Know Your Genre

You may have a fantastic story. You may think it is an original. But imagine that it's not. Imagine that it's already been done 100 times before.

You have two options here:

- Rethink your idea altogether, or
- Come up with a new and dramatic twist to the same story.

Think of all the stories that have been written about exploring, seeking new lands, seeing new people. This story has been written over and over, but it was only with the first science fiction writers that it was considered that this same story could be set in outer space.

It is therefore important to know your genre, so that you know what else has been written in the same area.

Know Your Audience

You need to know the demographics of the sort of people who will read your story. For example, if your story is aimed at 10-year-old boys, it's no good putting in lots of sex and violence, because parents will not let their child read it! So ensure you know who your audience is and who you are aiming at. Do not make assumptions

though. Do not assume that only women read romantic fiction and only men read science fiction. Do your research. Find out what people read.

KEEPING A NOTEBOOK

Elizabeth Gilbert, author of 'Eat Pray Love,' spoke about a conversation she had with the American poet Ruth Stone at a conference focussed on sharing ideas.

Ruth Stone grew up in rural Virginia and would be outside in the field when she would feel and hear a poem coming at her from over the landscape.

It was "...like a thunderous train of air and it would come barrelling down at her over the landscape. And when she felt it coming (because it would shake the earth under her feet), when she felt it coming she knew that she had only one thing to do and that was, in her words, 'run like hell'."

"And she would 'run like hell' into the house and she was being chased by this poem."

"The whole deal was that she had to get to a piece of paper and a pencil fast enough so that when it thundered through her she could collect it and grab it on the page."

"Other times she wouldn't be fast enough. So she'd be running and running and running and she wouldn't get to the house. The poem would barrel through her and she would miss it. And she said it would continue on across the landscape looking, as she put it, for another poet."

- Elizabeth Gilbert speaking about Ruth Stone.

What is the moral of this story? You should always carry a notebook and pen – particularly if you are not a good runner. Otherwise your stories may continue on without you, looking for another writer.

In your notebook you need to write anything that inspires you or that you think is interesting. It might be a sentence you overhear, an idea that they give you, something you see on the TV, something you read in a book - make a note of it in your notebook.

We don't mean that you copy someone else's work, but if a sentence or idea sounds interesting to you, write it down. Just a few words could become the basis for an idea or concept, the beginnings of your next novel or story.

Try to keep your notebook with you at all times. Or have more than one notebook, keep one by your bed and record your dreams. Take one in your handbag or bag and make notes when you can, put one by the kettle, anywhere that you spend time, so that they are easily accessible and can be written in as soon as you have an idea. You may never use the ideas you write down in your notebook, but you never know, those few words might become the basis for the next bestseller.

Remember to write down observations of people, yourself, smells, sounds, touch, your emotions, anything at all. These can be useful when describing people or situations in your books or stories.

Do particular smells bring back memories for you?

The Process of Story Development

There can be many ways to develop a story. The most important thing is that it is developed logically and systematically. (Always remember that rules are merely guidelines and sometimes breaking them can make a story more exciting to read).

The following is a typical way of developing a dramatic story.

Summary:

- The first step is to develop a premise (i.e. a concise statement of what happens in a story).
- The next step might be to develop the main characters (i.e. contrive a profile that describes who each of the main characters is).

- The third step may be to develop the principal events (beats, plot points or turning points). Consider these dramatic events, what their causes and effects are, what leads up to them, and what happens as a result.
- Next develop the sequence of main events. Sometimes it helps to jot each event down on a palm card and shuffle them around, playing with the order of events to see what effect this has on the reading of the story. Is your story circular? Do you start at the end and then flash back to the beginning? Or is it linear? Is it told in small moments from different perspectives?
- Finally, fill in minor events and details.

Planning Your Story

Why do we need to plan a story? Many writers find that they start off with a great story, write it and then find it doesn't work properly. This is often because they haven't planned exactly what happens (the sequence of events) and which characters are involved in enacting them. Planning helps eliminate errors in the construction of a story. It also saves you time which could be wasted correcting these errors. But planning isn't for every writer - some writers enjoy writing intuitively. You are the only one who can decide what works for you.

When planning, you need to have a good understanding of your goals.

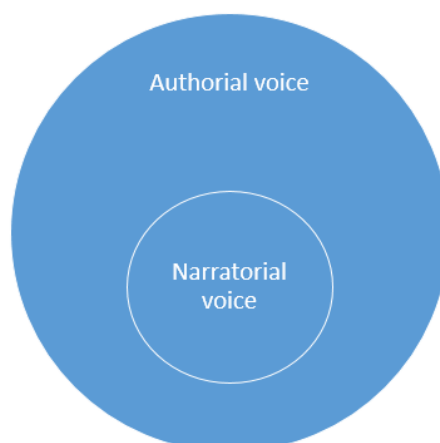
- What are you trying to accomplish with your story?
- How are you going to make the story funny/serious/sad/exciting/thrilling?
- What is your premise? Are you trying to prove or disprove a theory?

Developing Your Voice

There are two types of voices within most works: the authorial voice and the narratorial voice. It can be difficult to pick the difference, but they are distinct entities.

In non-fiction, most of the time the narrator and the author are the same. This means the voices are almost the same, but not quite. An easy way to test this is to think about perspective, point, and speech. When the author is the author, talking about something, they sound like themselves. You can hear that in their interviews, talks, and other material. When they are writing in a book, however, they are writing from a particular perspective to a specific audience to make a specific point. This changes the nature of their voice. You can test this by thinking about the different groups you interact with daily. Do you speak the same way with children as you do with adults? How does your language change?

Distinguishing between narratorial and authorial voice in fiction is more difficult. Narratorial voice sits inside authorial voice:



The authorial voice is the author's word choices, the way they speak, the way they communicate. The narratorial voice is the character of the narrator, and the worldview the narrator has. It encompasses that

character's feelings, ideas, and knowledge of the fictional world. A narrator cannot know more than an author, but an author can know more than a narrator. An author can have a large vocabulary, while their narrator can have a limited one. The author makes choices in the creation of the narrator. The choices they make, and how they choose to express these, perhaps through dialect, vocabulary, and focal points are authorial. The mode in which they are expressed, the speaking, is narratorial.

This is a difficult concept to grasp, especially when it is new. Something to remember is that the narrator is always a character. The narrator does not have to tell the truth, or act in a reliable fashion. The narrator is always a construction while, in most cases, the author is not. (Nested and complex narratives where these ideas are explored do exist.)

Narrators are an especially important part of dramatic writing, and in the genesis of much of what we consider drama, via the idea of the Greek chorus (originally "khoros"). Both chorus and narrator have the capacity to comment on the text/performance. They bring tonality and mood to the text, which ultimately affects reader perception and perspective. If the narrator has a serious tone, the text errs toward the serious; if the narrator is light-hearted and jocular in a serious text, it may cross into satire, parody, or another form of humour.

As you read through the below, think about the difference in authorial and narratorial voice.

Authors with Unique Voices

Tom Robbins – Tom has a magical way of weaving description and plot together. If one of his chapters were about a character called Jimmy, for example, he might start telling Jimmy's story by talking about a pot plant in the corner of the room in which Jimmy is sitting. Tom may then give you the whole history of the pot plant (which is usually quite comical) before working his way across the room gradually describing various objects and events before finally arriving at Jimmy who is sitting in the opposite corner not paying attention to any of the things that Tom has just described.

Alan Ginsberg, Excerpt from *Howl* –

*I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the
machinery of night,
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-
water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz,
who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement
roofs illuminated,
who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy
among the scholars of war,
who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull,
who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in wastebaskets and listening to the
Terror through the wall.*

- Alan Ginsberg, *Howl*

Authorial Voice

All authors have a voice, and voice is part of the appeal of a work. But there is a difference between your natural voice and cultivated artifice. You can learn from imitating authors you admire, but artifice – unless it is required artistically – often creates a distance between the reader and the work.

There are various schools of thought on if an author's voice should be clearly present or not. The answer, for you, will be specific to your situation. Much genre fiction, especially the plot-driven kind, uses a subdued voice. The narratorial voice may be strong, but the author's voice is relatively quiet. Literary fiction is often dependent

on a clear authorial voice, especially the character-driven kind. Different works have different requirements. Over time, you will find what works best for you.

Writing in your true voice is the easiest way of writing. As you grow and develop as a writer, you train your voice and develop it. It may not be what you want initially, but it will grow.

If you simply relax, write as clearly and simply as you can, your words will begin to flow. As the words flow, your voice will begin to emerge. It is important that you do not try to force your voice. As we said earlier, you should sound natural. If you try to write in a clever way or a stylish way that does not fit with your voice, it will not work. Your voice is original, it has its own special quality, use it, hone it, and develop it to write your stories your way.

Useful Terms

Antagonist	The villain – the most important unsympathetic character.
Back story	This details the relevant things that have happened before the novel or story starts. They may be revealed as the story progresses.
Catharsis	This is the climax or punch line of a story.
Point of View	Which character's perspective is the story being told from?
Protagonist	The hero - the most important sympathetic character.
Resolution	The satisfaction at the end of the story.

SUGGESTED READING

Find an example of dramatic writing to read and think about the things you have learnt in this lesson. This might be a book, a chapter from a book, an article, short story or anything else. It should be something you can finish reading within the space of one hour. It may be something you have at home already, something you borrow from a library, something in a magazine or newspaper you buy, or something you find on the internet.

Read this and reflect on how the writer has constructed this piece of writing. Ask yourself questions such as:

- Who is the protagonist?
- Who is the antagonist?
- What is the premise or concept?
- What is unique about the writer's voice?
- Whose point of view is the story being told from?
- What is the genre?
- Where do you think the author got the idea from?

- If you had to sum up the story in one sentence, what would it be?
- Have they used reflection, exposition, description, argument or explanation?

SET TASK

From your set reading, choose one paragraph that you think shows good dramatic writing. You will need this for your first assignment.

- Copy the paragraph you chose for your set task exactly. Make sure you reference it noting the author's name, book or article title, and page number. Submit this to your tutor.
- Copy the paragraph again. Go through it and underline every word that makes the paragraph dramatic.
- Now rewrite the paragraph without the dramatic words. Submit this to your tutor in the following assignment.
- Consider:
 - i. What is different about the two paragraphs?
 - ii. What do you think makes the first one dramatic?