**Getting Started**

***START SMALL!***  
  
Don't try to write the next ***Angels in America*** or ***Rent*** for your first play. A big problem for many young (and not so young) writers is starting a play and not finishing it. My favorite way to begin is with a ten-minute play, which, at a page per minute, is ten pages long. It's got a beginning, middle and an end, only everything happens more quickly. And you'd be surprised at how many theatres look specifically for ten-minute pieces (I have several that get produced fairly regularly). Once you write a few ten-minute plays, you can write a one-act of more substantial length and eventually work your way up to a full-length. Don't rush!  
  
***HOW DO I START: WHERE IDEAS COME FROM***  
Anywhere. Everywhere. Still stumped? Here are just a few possibilities: A line of dialogue. A title. A character, either fictitious or based on someone you met or observed or read about. A historical event. A setting. A theme/issue. Anything observed. An object. A photograph or an image. The newspaper. Your own life. Anything you care about. And that's the bottom line. You can't write about something which isn't in some way really, really, REALLY important to you.  
  
Find an idea? Take this germ of an idea and ask yourself "what if?" What if there's a homeless teenager? What if he's looking for someone? What if he's looking for his mother? (That became ***Ben***.) What if there's a "milk conspiracy?" (This is what we might call a "concept," and it became ***Milk and Cookies***.)  
  
This is the first step toward creating the world of your play. Now what? Who lives in this world? It's time to build some characters.

**The Playwright's Checklist (a revision tool)**

***A few questions to ask yourself about your play***  
I'm a big believer in asking the playwright questions about the play as a way of helping the playwright write the play he or she wants to write--not the play I want to write. Ask yourself these questions as you enter the revision process--answer them honestly--and help yourself to a better play.  
  
***Format***  
Is the speaker's name ever on one page, while the dialogue that goes with it is on another page? (If so, get them together.)  
  
Are the margins for dialogue and stage directions consistent? Are the speakers' names and the scene/act headings the only things centered?  
  
Is my title page businesslike, without being overly flashy? Does it have the necessary contact information (name, address, phone number, email address) unless the submission guidelines tell me to do otherwise?  
  
***Dialogue***  
Have I eliminated ninety-nine percent of filler words like "well," "uh," "OK," "all right," etc.? While they are meant to make dialogue sound "realistic," they don't really add anything.  
  
Have I punctuated the dialogue accurately? Have I gotten someone else to read it out loud in front of me so that I can hear if the punctuation makes sense? It's super important to put periods, commas, dashes, semicolons and whatever else you're using where they belong. It's the only real opportunity you have to communicate the rhythm of the lines to the actors.  
  
Have I run a spell check? Have I proofread by reading aloud to make sure nothing has slipped through? Often, you can misspell a word into another correct word that your spell check won't detect. Have I given the play to someone else who has a good editor's eye?  
  
Do I avoid dialogue which is only there to "tell" about the characters? Can I replace it with an action of some kind? For example, instead of a character telling us he is afraid of spiders, he could jump onto the sofa and scream for help.  
  
If there are long monologues, do they have a good reason for being there?  
  
***Stage Directions***  
Are the stage directions clear, concise and grammatical?  
  
Do I use the stage directions to describe what happens but not to write a novel or long descriptions of characters' feelings?  
  
Do I write the stage directions in the "active voice"?  
  
Is it clear which character is supposed to do an action or perform a stage direction? Don't assume that it's obvious--usually, you should mention the character specifically.  
  
Have I avoided line readings (e.g. "angrily") except in crucial cases?  
  
Have I given a specific time and a specific place (e.g. a living room, not merely inside a house) at the beginning of the play?  
  
Have I introduced each character with a one-line description (age, gender if it's not obvious, and a phrase of description)? This is crucial to help a potential director or producer determine who could be cast in the role, or simply to help a reader get a handle on your play.

***Character***  
Is each character distinct and well-developed? Is each character's speech consistent with his background and education? Do the characters sound different from each other?  
  
What if you removed a character from the play? What would be lost? (Edit Villarreal, one of my professors, suggested this exercise, and it's a great way to make sure that you don't have two characters who basically fulfill the same function.)  
  
Is each character's behavior and actions believable? Try "trapping" your characters, so that they feel they have no choice but to do what they do.  
  
Does each character have a unique position in the play? In other words, if two characters fulfill pretty much the same function in a play, how can you make them different?  
  
Are the relationships between the characters clearly established?  
  
Do the characters change? Static characters aren't as interesting to play.  
  
Did you pick the characters' names for a reason? As a sidenote, be careful of naming characters too similarly (e.g. James and Jack).  
  
***Other Content Issues***  
Does the play have a clear conflict with a beginning, a middle and an end? Does the conflict build as the play goes on? Remember that two characters arguing isn't conflict. Conflict is driven by characters trying to get what they want.  
  
Are the stakes high enough? It has to be crucial to each character that she gets what she wants.  
  
Is there a ticking clock? Time pressure always creates additional tension.  
  
Is what happens in the play a result of choices the characters make, or do outside events dictate what happens? Strive for the former.  
  
If the play requires research, do you have your facts straight?  
  
Is the tone of the play consistent? You don't want a play to be a farce for the first ten pages and a family drama for the last ten.  
  
Do you give the audience new information, or do you merely tell us things we already know? Audiences get bored without new information, and remember that while news may be new to a character, be careful if it's not new to us.  
  
Every play is its own world that you create. Are the rules of that world consistent?  
  
Is your play's title both catchy and fitting?  
  
Does the play begin at the right point? Sometimes a play begins too early when it should begin in the middle of action.  
  
Does every scene have conflict? Characters who desperately want things don't ever stop trying to get what they want.

**Building Characters**

 You can't have a play without characters. You can put talking (or non-talking) dogs or rocks on stage, but guess what: they're still characters. That means you have to figure out who they are. Let me suggest three possible models:  
  
***Model One***  
The police file or bone structure model. Divide a character's attributes into three categories: physical, social and emotional. Physical includes things like height, weight, skin color, muscularity, etc. Social is education, class, job, hobbies, history, family, living situation, religion—all the things that have to do with a person and his place in society. Emotional includes mental health and disposition—all things psychological. Be as exhaustive as you can in creating the character to create a detailed person.  
  
Remember, not all (maybe not even most) of this information will actually find its way into the play. So why bother to make it up? Isn't it a waste of time? The answer is no, because this information will show why a character behaves the way she does. For example, knowing that Ellen's best childhood friend was black may explain why Ellen sticks up for a black woman she doesn't know in a dispute at a restaurant. That Ellen's friend was black may never come up in the play, but you, the author, knows.  
  
***Model Two***  
Simply start writing. Create an age and gender, then let the character behave how he or she wants to behave. This is probably best for more experienced writers. E-mail me to ask me why.  
  
***Model Three***  
The compromise solution—between Models One and Two, but not necessarily in quality. Come up with the character's name and gender, then try to create a few defining points for each character. For example, Ben (the homeless teen in the play named for him) was put up for adoption when he was nearly four years old, used to wrestle before he dropped out of high school and was abused by his therapist. He is nearly sixteen years old. These pieces of information define, in broad strokes, who he is. The details can then come in the writing. I like this approach because it gives you a certain foundation, but it doesn't lock you in. This is how I work.  
  
***Model Three "A"***  
This is a slightly more structured variation on Model Three. For each character, come up with three words to describe him. For example, she is a mother, a teacher and a sky diver. Come up with three physical characteristics (e.g. athletic) and three emotional ones (e.g. uptight) to go along with them. Add in one problem. For example, he wants to buy a car. Find an obstacle. He has no money. Sprinkle one secret into the mix—he has been arrested for drunk driving and lost his license, perhaps—and you're ready to serve.  
  
***Character Tip: Find a Verb***Define each character with a verb, and let that verb help you shape their behavior. For example, a character who "hides" may be the one who leaves the room in the middle of a confrontation or who cannot be without his friend (behind whom he hides).

**Where and When: the Setting**

Now that you've created all these really great characters, you have to put them somewhere. Not all settings are created equal. The setting that works best for your play is the one that allows you to create the most conflict and tension when you put your characters in it. For example, an escaped prisoner hiding in a police station is a lot more exciting than one in a remote forest.  
  
***QUICK TIP:*** Noted playwright and screenwriter Bruce Graham told a group of us sitting around a conference table one morning in Philadelphia that he likes to walk around his settings. For example, when he was going to write about characters in a hotel, he checked into a hotel and really explored all the possibilities of that setting. So if you're going to write about characters at school, even though you may go there every day, pay a visit to your school as a playwright—you may see things differently than you do as a student.  
  
The "when" of your setting is just as important as the "where." What year is it? What time of day is it? Again, select a time that works with your place to create the most conflict and tension. A student stealing the teacher's answer key long after everyone has gone home isn't as interesting as the same student stealing the key in the middle of the day, with the teacher due back at any moment.

**Play Structure the Easy Way**

The legendary playwright and dramaturg Leon Katz once described the two essential elements of play structure as follows. He said that in the beginning, what's going on should make the audience say, "that's interesting" and want to stay with the play. By the end, that should turn to "wow."   
While there are many ways (see below, where I talk about them) to structure your play, let's start with an oldie but a goodie:  
  
Think of a play as having three parts. Let's call them—big surprise—the beginning, middle and end. And plays are all about conflict. So here's how it works:  
  
Let's assume we have two characters, JACK and JILL. In the beginning of the play, we introduce the conflict. Jack wants Jill's pail of water. Jill says no. Conflict.  
  
If Jack says, "OK. Fine. Have a nice day, Jill," the play is over. He can't do this. There must be some really good reason Jack can't walk away. Maybe he's dying of thirst. Jill has the only water for miles, and if Jack doesn't get water in the next ten minutes, he's going to die. There is now something at stake for Jack; if he doesn't get the water, there's a consequence: he'll die. And not only that, there's what we call "the ticking clock." The play has a sense of urgency. All this can happen in the beginning.  
  
So as we move to the middle of the play, Jack changes tactics. Maybe he tries to bribe her with money or a goldfish or a new Porsche. Maybe he threatens to beat her up. But Jill needs the water too. She needs to wash her dog before it competes in a dog show, and her family needs the prize money or they'll starve to death. Whatever the reason, it has to be good. Remember, Jack is running out of time. Things are getting desperate.  
  
That leaves the end. In the end of a play, four things can happen. One, Jack gets what he wants. He takes the pail from Jill and drains it on the spot. Two, Jill gets what she wants. Jack may drop dead, but the dog wins the show and Jill's family gets the prize money. Three, they both get what they want. Jack drinks enough to get to the next water hole, but Jill has some water left—the dog gets second place, which still nets them some prize money. Not as much as before, but enough to get by. Four, neither gets what they want. They fight over the pail, spill the water, and everybody's miserable.  
  
That's it, folks. A beginning introduces the characters, the conflict, the stakes and a ticking clock. The middle builds the conflict and develops the characters as they change tactics. In the end, they either get it or they don't.  
  
***ADVANCED PLAY STRUCTURES NEW!***  
This is definitely a proceed at your own risk section, and I STRONGLY recommend that beginners skip this section. NOW!  
  
***GAPPED STRUCTURE***Your play consists of a series of scenes in which time has passed between each scene. For example, the first scene is in April, while the next one is in May. What keeps the audience interested in this type of play is not what happens during the scenes, but what happens between them. It's the job of the audience to discover during each scene what has happened since the previous scene ended. They are, in a sense, playing detective as they catch up to the new situation of the characters. Gapped plays are a form of landscape play, which, fittingly, is my next topic...  
  
***LANDSCAPE PLAYS***  
Landscape plays are quite simple to explain, though not quite that easy to write well. They begin with very little information about where we are or the given circumstances of the play. But as the play continues, it fills in more and more of the landscape. An example is Beckett's Endgame, in which only gradually does the picture become clear.  
  
***ANECDOTAL STRUCTURE***  
The play is made up of a series of characters seemingly going along on their own separate stories. But by the end of the play, the stories have all intersected into one. Imagine five different threads, each individual and perhaps not even appearing to be touching, but as you move closer to one end, the threads are getting closer and closer until they knot. For examples, see the work of Chekhov.  
  
***PROCESS PLAYS New***  
Process plays are structured around some event, some particular process. For example, two people have dinner. When dinner ends, so does the play.

**Writing Dialogue**

Want to write great dialogue? Before you can learn how to make characters talk in ways that people remember, you have to learn to listen.  
  
Dialogue isn't like real speech. It's what I call heightened or edited speech. Take a few minutes, for example, to listen—without talking—to your friends at lunch. You'll find that they don't finish their sentences, use lots of "filler words" (examples are "well," "like," "um"), repeat themselves and probably talk about nothing ninety percent of the time.  
  
On stage, we have a limited amount of time. We don't have time for every "well" or long conversations about the weather. We have to edit. Here are a few helpful hints:  
  
Dialogue should advance the plot/conflict and develop the character speaking it (either through what the character says or how he/she says it).  
  
Dialogue shouldn't tell us something that can be shown instead. For example, why have a character say "I'm afraid" if he can instead hide under a bed?  
  
Dish out information to the audience on a need-to-know basis. In other words, don't have parts of your play that are only about giving us information (e.g. characters talking about themselves) and that don't advance the plot/conflict. You'll be sorry, and we'll be bored.  
  
Be careful of long monologues. While monologues can be wonderful, if they're not done well, they can often the stop the forward movement of a play.  
  
Read dialogue out loud to hear how it sounds. Punctuate it carefully, because it's your best opportunity to make clear your intentions to the director and the actors. Real people often use contractions when they speak.  
  
Be consistent. A guy who can't put a grammatical sentence together one minute isn't likely to sound like an English professor the next minute. Make sure that the words a character uses are consistent with his education and background.  
  
Remember, much of what makes a play memorable is its dialogue, so make every word count!

***Having Trouble With Dialogue? Here's a Tip!***

Try imagining a particular actor you know (or even a famous one) in the role. Often, when you can visualize your character very specifically, it's easier to make her talk. It doesn't matter that the actor will probably never do the role.

**The Art of Writing Stage Directions**

Plays are meant to be seen on stage, not on the page—right? Right, but before it makes it to the stage, the play must make it through a reader or a small army of readers. I've been one. And then, of course, assuming you survive the readers (and the literary manager and the artistic director), there is the director, the actors, the designers, etc. Each of them wants as clear a picture of your play on stage as possible. A few thoughts on how you can help them:  
  
Keep your stage directions as compact as possible, with active verbs. In other words, instead of "Jennifer is sitting on the carpet" at the opening of a play, "Jennifer sits on a carpet." Note that I didn't write "Jennifer sits down."  
  
Introduce each character with a one-liner which tells us his age and gives the reader (and potential producers) a handle on her: "Annie, mid-20s and a walking accident." Remember, if I'm a producer, I want to know who I can cast in the role; I want to know the character's age and type.  
  
Avoid "over creating" a character (even if you've come up with this information in your police file—see Building Characters above—keep it to yourself): "five-foot-three, with red hair and green eyes and heavyset." Unless it's crucial to the play, you're wasting time on something that's irrelevant. What if there's a really good actress who's five-foot-five or has brown hair? You'll come off as an amateur.  
  
In this same vein, don't direct the play on the page. Avoid "line readings"—don't preface every line of dialogue with "sadly," "angrily," etc. I only use line readings like these if it's crucial, which means I might have a handful in a full-length play. Instead, put in a "pause" or a "beat" and leave it to the actors and director to figure it out. You might discover something interesting.  
  
Stage directions are written to be read. Make them well-written and clear. There's nothing wrong with giving them a little spin, but don't write a novel. A teacher of mine, when talking about screenwriting, told me never to clump more than six lines of description together. In playwriting it's OK to break that law, but it's not a bad thing to keep the spirit of it in the back of your mind.

**Top 10 Writing Tips (includes a special note on Writing Software)**

***TIP 1: Proper Format***  
Presenting your script properly is crucial. As a reader, it's easy to get turned off to a script that isn't formatted correctly and which makes reading more difficult. Page margins are usually 1" on the top, bottom and on the right, but 1.5" on the left (because of hole punching/brads/binding). Manuscript format calls for the character name to be centered (or left indented at a consistent margin, either an extra 2.5" or 3") in CAPS, with dialogue on the next line running margin to margin. Stage directions go on their own line and in parentheses, indented an extra 2" on the left side (so basically 3.5" from the left edge of the paper). A common mistake is for writers to copy published script format by putting character names on the left, which is harder to read. Check some of my PDF script excerpts to see what proper format looks like, and if it's still unclear, email me.  
  
***TIP 3: Read Away Your Influences***  
If you read a couple of Beckett plays, I'd be willing to bet that the next few pieces you write will read like Beckett—until you get it out of your system (I admit I went through my own Beckett/Ionesco period). So after you read that Beckett play, go out and read Arthur Miller, then read Wilson (August, though Lanford would also be revelatory). Read Shakespeare. Tony Kushner. Edward Albee. Marsha Norman. David Mamet. Paula Vogel. Anton Chekhov. Swill all these different styles into the melting pot of your mind, and eventually, if you write enough, your own style will develop. Check out my Young Playwrights Reading List for a more organized list of reading suggestions.  
  
***TIP 4: Write What You Know—Or Not***  
Many young writers (and older writers) are told, "Write what you know." Good advice, I suppose, but I rarely follow it. What I don't know is so much more interesting. Ben is about a teenager living on the street in Harvard Square and looking for the woman he believes is his mother. Yes, I lived in Harvard Square in college and was a teenager at one time, but I've never been homeless, have two wonderful parents, etc.; Ben's life is not one I knew. So I read about it. I spent a term volunteering at a shelter for troubled teens. I kept my eyes open. But above all, I was truly, desperately interested in the world of my play and the people in it. It's that desperate interest that allows you to write what you don't know.  
  
***TIP 5: Just Get It On Paper!***  
A first draft isn't supposed to be perfect. Not even close. Don't worry—just keep going! Let the play go where it wants to go, because THE MOST IMPORTANT THING is finishing. The time to second-guess yourself is after you can safely type "Blackout. End of play."  
  
***TIP 6: Write Something Else***  
Finish a script? Start another one. Now. Writing a script is like giving birth, and the script is your baby. Our babies are always beautiful and perfect. In our eyes, they can do no wrong. But no first (or second or third or . . .) draft is ever perfect. By writing something new, you make the new play your baby, and the first play becomes the older sibling, perhaps even a teenager. Now you have some distance to look at it critically, because we all know that teenagers are never perfect.  
  
Also, if you're sending out a script to contests or theatres, writing something new sure beats waiting for the mail to arrive every afternoon. And on that note, remember that responses to your submissions may range from weeks (this is extremely speedy) to months or even a year or two.  
  
***TIP 7: Give Every Character a Moment!***  
Actors want the chance to act. No one gets excited about playing the third tree on the left. So make sure to give every character at least one &#x201moment” where the actor can shine. It’s how you make actors want to do your play, even if their roles aren’t the largest.  
  
***TIP 8: Stuff That Doesn't Play***  
Some things just don't seem to work on stage. You may be the genius who can pull them off, but keep an eye on this space for a list of things you're probably better off avoiding. Here they are:  
  
People talking about how they feel rather than showing how they feel. Phone calls on stage. Chase scenes, especially car chases. Animals. Elaborate special effects. Stage directions that dictate characters' facial expressions (e.g. a dirty look—half the time you can't even see it from the audience). Inside jokes. More to come…  
  
***TIP 9: Stuck? Try Improv***  
Not sure where to go in a scene, or is it just not working? Actors are often a great source of ideas. Get a few actor friends together, set up the scene for them, and let them play it out, with you recording (either audio or video) what happens. Try it as many times as you like, changing some element of the set-up each time, so that you get to see different choices played out in front of you. They might hit on something useful.  
  
***TIP 10: Know Your Audience***  
A play with lots of humor about your particular high school teachers will only work at your high school, because no other audience will understand the jokes. If you are writing a play for children, leave out the four-letter words. If it’s a touring show, don’t write sets that can’t be packed into a box at the end of the day. Writing for the high school market? Try to write more female roles than male roles, as schools usually have an abundance of women. Writing for professional theater? Keep your cast size down, because every actor who does a bit part still has to be paid.

**Extra Tips on Writing Monologues**

A monologue is really any extended speech by one character (anywhere from maybe thirty seconds to a one-person show that’s more than ninety minutes in length). Monologues are usually part of a larger play, but sometimes they are written to stand alone. There may or may not be another character on stage. I tend to avoid long monologues in my plays, because if you’re not careful, monologues tend to slow plays down. But a good monologue is a wonderful thing, and actors always need them for auditions. So if you want to write a monologue, whether as part of a play or as a stand-alone, remember a few tips:  
  
The character delivering the monologue must want something in the present. In other words, why is he telling us this? What does he want right now, and how is delivering the monologue helping him get it? Monologues whose only purpose is to describe something that happened don’t work.  
  
Monologues, like dialogue, have two functions: to move the plot/story forward and to tell us more about the character. That doesn’t mean that the character literally should tell us about herself. We should learn more about her from what she says and from how she says it.

**Help with Rewriting (including the Writer's Web)**

***WHY WE REWRITE***  
There are many reasons to rewrite. We can always write better dialogue, create more specific characters. In fact, if you hop on down (hit your page down key), the writer's "web" will give you a whole bunch of places to look.  
  
But before you move on, keep one reason to rewrite in mind: plays change as we write them. The characters or story may have moved in unexpected directions. Your ideas may have changed as you wrote. You may have changed as a person.  
  
Remember, particularly when you are younger, you are bombarded with new life experiences every minute. You may not be the same person in February as you were in January. Your interests or concerns may be different. So a big part of rewriting is going back to the beginning of the play and "making it one" with the end. We call it re-centering, and it's a crucial part of rewriting.  
  
***You are now ready to rewrite.***  
Don't know how to start? Try the Web, a creation of my good friend and fellow playwright, Ed Shockley. Here's why it works: specifics and details draw an audience into the "web" of your play. So with each strand of your rewrite web, your job is to find the specifics that bring the world of your play alive.

***THE WEB***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Dialogue | Props | Costume |
| Place | Storytelling | Disability |
| Time of Day | Character History/Relationship | Myth/Legend |
| An Absent Character | History | Set |
| Weather | Race | Theme/Thesis |
| Religion/Philosophy | Gender | Natural/Artificial Sound |
| Character | Names | Subtext |
| Music | Plot | Story (what's going on in the world) |
| Title |  |  |

Practically speaking, what does all this mean? Let's say, for example, you want to work on the "Story" strand. The way I use story, it means what's going on in the world. So if you write a play about a guy buying a loaf of bread, how does the play change if it's in the middle of the Cuban Missile Crisis? How does it affect the actions of the characters and what they want? What happens if it's raining ("Weather)? Or they're stuck in a store that's snowed in for the night? Or the temperature is ninety degrees? What if one of the characters is deaf ("Disability")? See how adding a strand of specifics can really change your play.

**What to Do with Your "Finished" Play**

The saying is that good plays aren't written, they're rewritten. At each stage of the process I outline below, expect to rewrite. Does that mean you have to write your play from scratch each time? Of course not. But it does mean that you should be prepared to make significant changes and keep an open mind.  
  
1. Once you've finished your first draft, go back and proofread it, because at every step of the way, your script needs to be as typographically and grammatically clean as possible. Run a spell check, but then proof "by hand." Why proof manually? Because spell check doesn't catch every error, particularly if you misspell a word into another word (for example, your vs. you're, it's and its). When you finish, print a new copy.  
  
***QUICK TIP*:** Save each draft as a different draft number, and remember to back up your play somewhere other than your hard drive—in case of a crash. Also, if you have the choice, don't keep everything at one location—e.g. have a parent keep one set of disks at work, in case of fire, burglary, etc. at home.  
  
2. Reread your first draft. Use the writer's web and the trouble shooter's checklist to rewrite and shape your script. Often, each "sweep" through the script will be to address one particular element of the web (e.g. looking at the way a specific character speaks).  
  
3. When you feel that you've done all you can do on your own, give the script to someone you trust. But if you don't have anyone in whose judgment you feel absolutely confident, I'd skip this step, because bad feedback is worse than no feedback.  
  
QUICK TIP: There is no law that says you must act on every comment. If I agree with someone's criticism, I rewrite. Otherwise, I disregard it.  
  
4. The next step is a sit-down (sometimes called a “table reading”) reading. Get a group of actors (or even a group of your friends) together. If you’d like, gather a few people whose feedback you trust as the “audience.” This reading is for you to hear the script out loud and perhaps to get some feedback. For all readings, it's best to give the actors the script ahead of time so they can practice and not trip over the words.

***SUPER SUPER IMPORTANT!!!******YOU ARE NOT YOUR PLAY. YOUR PLAY IS NOT YOU.***

Never take criticism of your play as a criticism of you as a person.  
  
5. Have a directed, rehearsed reading. To do this, you need to find a director and actors. They should have several rehearsals (the reading will be script in hand), and there will probably be some minimal staging (movement). You may wish to invite an audience, or sometimes it's better to work through the script simply with the actors and the director. If you do invite an audience, invite an audience that you think will be constructive. After the reading, have a discussion. Either you or your director should moderate, and it's a good idea to come up with a list of questions which you would like answered. Some stock questions are "what worked?" "what didn't you understand?" and "what would you like to see more or less of?"  
  
QUICK TIP: I strongly recommend that you follow the "silent author" rule. When there's a discussion of my work, I write down every comment made, but I NEVER defend my work or enter the discussion in any way, except to ask questions if I don't understand a comment. If I don't agree with a comment or a suggestion, I ignore it.  
  
6. Have a staged reading in a public setting with a more general audience. Have a directed post-show discussion to get feedback if you like.  
  
7. If you have the opportunity, have a more fully realized production (using props and costumes, minimal set) at your school or in a similarly safe place. At productions of my work, I watch the audience—seeing how they react during the performance gives me clues as to what is working and what isn’t.  
  
At any step of this process, you can always back-track if you're not satisfied that your script is ready to move up the ladder. When you feel that your script is ready (don't rush!), it's time to look at young playwrights contests and other opportunities for young writers. Good luck!  
  
***I CAN'T SAY IT ENOUGH!***  
  
Sloppy scripts—with misspelled words, poorly punctuated sentences, handwritten changes—are the mark of sloppy writing. Many readers are instructed to put them down, and this can kill your relationship with a theatre. Your script is your face. Don't show it until it's clean!!