

Drama

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What this handout is about

This handout identifies common questions about drama, describes the elements of drama that are most often discussed in theater classes, provides a few strategies for planning and writing an effective drama paper, and identifies various resources for research in theater history and dramatic criticism. We'll give special attention to writing about productions and performances of plays.

What is drama? And how do you write about it?

When we describe a situation or a person's behavior as "dramatic," we usually mean that it is intense, exciting (or excited), striking, or vivid. The works of drama that we study in a classroom share those elements. For example, if you are watching a play in a theatre, feelings of tension and anticipation often arise because you are wondering what will happen between the characters on stage. Will they shoot each other? Will they finally confess their undying love for one another? When you are reading a play, you may have similar questions. Will Oedipus figure out that he was the one who caused the plague by killing his father and sleeping with his mother? Will Hamlet successfully avenge his father's murder?

For instructors in academic departments—whether their classes are about theatrical literature, theater history, performance studies, acting, or the technical aspects of a production—writing about drama often means explaining what makes the plays we watch or read so exciting. Of course, one particular production of a play may not be as exciting as it's supposed to be. In fact, it may not be exciting at all. Writing about drama can also involve figuring out why and how a production went wrong.

What's the difference between plays, productions, and performances?

Talking about plays, productions, and performances can be difficult, especially since there's so much overlap in the uses of these terms. Although there are some exceptions, usually plays are what's on the written page. A production of a play is a series of performances, each of which may have its own idiosyncratic features. For example, one production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* might set the play in 1940's Manhattan, and another might set the play on an Alpaca farm in New Zealand. Furthermore, in a particular performance (say, Tuesday night) of that production, the actor playing Malvolio might get fed up with playing the role as an Alpaca herder, shout about the indignity of the whole thing, curse Shakespeare for ever writing the

play, and stomp off the stage. See how that works?

Be aware that the above terms are sometimes used interchangeably—but the overlapping elements of each are often the most exciting things to talk about. For example, a series of particularly bad performances might distract from excellent production values: If the actor playing Falstaff repeatedly trips over a lance and falls off the stage, the audience may not notice the spectacular set design behind him. In the same way, a particularly dynamic and inventive script (play) may so bedazzle an audience that they never notice the inept lighting scheme.

A few analyzable elements of plays

Plays have many different elements or aspects, which means that you should have lots of different options for focusing your analysis. Playwrights—writers of plays—are called “wrights” because this word means “builder.” Just as shipwrights build ships, playwrights build plays. A playwright’s raw materials are words, but to create a successful play, he or she must also think about the performance—about what will be happening on stage with sets, sounds, actors, etc. To put it another way: the words of a play have their meanings within a larger context—the context of the production. When you watch or read a play, think about how all of the parts work (or could work) together.

For the play itself, some important contexts to consider are

- The time period in which the play was written
- The playwright’s biography and his/her other writing
- Contemporaneous works of theater (plays written or produced by other artists at roughly the same time)
- The language of the play
- Setting
- Plot
- Themes
- Characters

Depending on your assignment, you may want to focus on one of these elements exclusively or compare and contrast two or more of them. Keep in mind that any one of these elements may be more than enough for a dissertation, let alone a short reaction paper. Also remember that in most cases, your assignment will ask you to provide some kind of analysis, not simply a plot summary—so don’t think that you can write a paper about *A Doll’s House* that simply describes the events leading up to Nora’s fateful decision.

Since a number of academic assignments ask you to pay attention to the language of the play and since it might be the most complicated thing to work with, it’s worth looking at a few of the ways you might be asked to deal with it in more detail.

Language

There are countless ways that you can talk about how language works in a play, a production, or a particular performance. Given a choice, you should probably focus on words, phrases, lines, or scenes that really struck you, things that you still remember weeks after reading the play or seeing the performance. You'll have a much easier time writing about a bit of language that you feel strongly about (love it or hate it).

That said, here are two common ways to talk about how language works in a play:

How characters are constructed by their language

If you have a strong impression of a character, especially if you haven't seen that character depicted on stage, you probably remember one line or bit of dialogue that really captures who that character is. Playwrights often distinguish their characters with idiosyncratic or at least individualized manners of speaking. Take this example from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

ALGERNON: Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

LANE: I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

ALGERNON: I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

LANE: Yes, sir.

ALGERNON: And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

This early moment in the play contributes enormously to what the audience thinks about the aristocratic Algernon and his servant, Lane. If you were to talk about language in this scene, you could discuss Lane's reserved replies: Are they funny? Do they indicate familiarity or sarcasm? How do you react to a servant who replies in that way? Or you could focus on Algernon's witty responses. Does Algernon really care what Lane thinks? Is he talking more to hear himself? What does that say about how the audience is supposed to see Algernon? Algernon's manner of speech is part of who his character is. If you are analyzing a particular performance, you might want to comment on the actor's delivery of these lines: Was his vocal inflection appropriate? Did it show something about the character?

How language contributes to scene and mood

Ancient, medieval, and Renaissance plays often use verbal tricks and nuances to convey the setting and time of the play because performers during these periods didn't have elaborate special-effects technology to create theatrical illusions. For example, most scenes from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* take place at night. The play was originally performed in an open-air theatre in the bright and sunny afternoon. How did Shakespeare communicate the fact that it was night-time in the play? Mainly by starting scenes like this:

BANQUO: How goes the night, boy?

FLEANCE: The moon is down; I have not heard the clock.

BANQUO: And she goes down at twelve.

FLEANCE: I take't, 'tis later, sir.

BANQUO: Hold, take my sword. There's husbandry in heaven; Their candles are all out. Take thee that too. A heavy summons lies like lead upon me, And yet I would not sleep: merciful powers, Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature Gives way to in repose!

Enter MACBETH, and a Servant with a torch

Give me my sword.

Who's there?

Characters entering with torches is a pretty big clue, as is having a character say, "It's night." Later in the play, the question, "Who's there?" recurs a number of times, establishing the illusion that the characters can't see each other. The sense of encroaching darkness and the general mysteriousness of night contributes to a number of other themes and motifs in the play.

Productions and performances

Productions

For productions as a whole, some important elements to consider are:

- **Venue:** How big is the theatre? Is this a professional or amateur acting company? What kind of resources do they have? How does this affect the show?
- **Costumes:** What is everyone wearing? Is it appropriate to the historical period? Modern? Trendy? Old-fashioned? Does it fit the character? What does his/her costume make you think about each character? How does this affect the show?
- **Set design:** What does the set look like? Does it try to create a sense of "realism"? Does it set the play in a particular historical period? What impressions does the set create? Does the set change, and if so, when and why? How does this affect the show?
- **Lighting design:** Are characters ever in the dark? Are there spotlights? Does light come through windows? From above? From below? Is any tinted or colored light projected? How does this affect the show?
- **"Idea" or "concept":** Do the set and lighting designs seem to work together to produce a certain interpretation? Do costumes and other elements seem coordinated? How does this affect the show?

You've probably noticed that each of these ends with the question, "How does this affect the show?" That's because you should be connecting every detail that you analyze back to this question. If a particularly weird costume (like King Henry in scuba gear) suggests something about the character (King Henry has gone off the deep end, literally and figuratively), then you can ask yourself, "Does this add or detract from the show?" (King Henry having an interest in aquatic mammals may not have been what Shakespeare had in mind.)

Performances

For individual performances, you can analyze all the items considered above in light of how they might have been different the night before. For example, some important elements to consider are:

- Individual acting performances: What did the actor playing the part bring to the performance? Was there anything particularly moving about the performance that night that surprised you, that you didn't imagine from reading the play beforehand (if you did so)?
- Mishaps, flubs, and fire alarms: Did the actors mess up? Did the performance grind to a halt or did it continue?
- Audience reactions: Was there applause? At inappropriate points? Did someone fall asleep and snore loudly in the second act? Did anyone cry? Did anyone walk out in utter outrage?

Response papers

Instructors in drama classes often want to know what you really think. Sometimes they'll give you very open-ended assignments, allowing you to choose your own topic; this freedom can have its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, you may find it easier to express yourself without the pressure of specific guidelines or restrictions. On the other hand, it can be challenging to decide what to write about. The elements and topics listed above may provide you with a jumping-off point for more open-ended assignments. Once you've identified a possible area of interest, you can ask yourself questions to further develop your ideas about it and decide whether it might make for a good paper topic. For example, if you were especially interested in the lighting, how did the lighting make you feel? Nervous? Bored? Distracted? It's usually a good idea to be as specific as possible. You'll have a much more difficult time if you start out writing about "imagery" or "language" in a play than if you start by writing about that ridiculous face Helena made when she found out Lysander didn't love her anymore.

If you're really having trouble getting started, here's a three point plan for responding to a piece of theater—say, a performance you recently observed.

1. Make a list of five or six specific words, images, or moments that caught your attention while you were sitting in your seat.
2. Answer one of the following questions: Did any of the words, images, or moments you listed contribute to your enjoyment or loathing of the play? Did any of them seem to add to or detract from any overall theme that the play may have had? Did any of them make you think of something completely different and wholly irrelevant to the play? If so, what connection might there be?
3. Write a few sentences about how each of the items you picked out for the second question affected you and/or the play.

This list of ideas can help you begin to develop an analysis of the performance and your own reactions to it.

Two of our other handouts might be useful if you need to do research in the specialized field of performance studies (a branch of communication studies) or want to focus especially closely on poetic or powerful language in a play: these handouts are about communication studies and poetry explications. For additional tips on writing about plays as a form of literature, see our handout on writing about fiction.

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

Worthen, W.B. *The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama*. New York: Heinle & Heinle, 1999.

Carter, Paul. *The Backstage Handbook: An Illustrated Almanac of Technical Information*, 3rd Ed. Shelter Island, New York: Broadway Press, 1994.

UNC Libraries Comprehensive Guide to Resources for the Study of Drama and Theater.



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