

# Once Upon a Playwriting Idea



*Making Your Concept Stage-worthy*

by Liza Lentini

This article is not about how to get over your fear of writing—but it could be. After all, *fear* is the number one reason folks don't finish what they start, or even begin the story they want to tell. When I was a young idealist, starting to teach my own workshop in New York City, I never, ever suspected that at the beginning of every new class I would have to prep myself for at least one person pulling me aside and telling me: "I shouldn't be here. Can I get my money back? I can't write a play to save my life. I don't want to bother trying." My response? Go *ahead and leave, then*. The earth will continue to turn on its axis, the sun will still rise tomorrow, and everyone will get on with their lives without noticing you decided to cop out. My point is: There are no excuses.

In order to approach writing a play, you must have a burning idea—something inside you that demands to be portrayed on stage. From that great idea comes an even greater story, and with that story, you can build your play. You may only perceive a glimpse of a scene or a mysterious character, you may not know what your play is called or how it ends, and all that is perfectly fine. Better, in fact. Because by the time you finish reading this article, you'll have the answers to those questions, and have learned to conquer fear by bringing in its arch nemesis: *fun*.

## GET YOUR CHARACTER IN CHECK

The debate over which comes first—a play's character or its plot—is

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endless. We don't have to resolve that here and now, but what you do have to do, is pick your central character. That is, who your play is about. This may not be as obvious as you think, as your central character may not be the most colorful, the most loveable, or even the most interesting (to you). Your central character will, however, be the one main character who learns something by your play's ending. The reason an audience member purchases a ticket to spend (roughly) two hours with your play is because they want to discover something. The eyes through which you allow them to make this discovery belong to your central character.

Peter Filichia is a critic for the Star-Ledger in New Jersey. He writes a column three times a week ([www.theatermania.com/peterfilichia](http://www.theatermania.com/peterfilichia)), and he's a man who believes that the more playwrights know about their characters, the better. "Make sure your characters are real; I always suggest filling out a job application for them," he says. "Get a pad of job applications from your local stationery store, one ideally for a low-level job. Those tend to be the ones that ask questions such a height and weight, and that starts a playwright thinking: Is my character overweight? How has that affected him? Is he embarrassed by it? Happy eating no matter what the consequences? Is he short? Is he adversely affected by it, aware that the best jobs go to the tall people? Or is he/she combative as a result of it. Pretty soon you'll find that who your characters are will put them in situations in which they'll either thrive or have to extricate themselves. And, as an exercise, how about putting your characters in situations that they'll never encounter in the play—just to see how they'll react in such circumstances. You'll learn even more about them!"

Eventually, you will need to know all you can about your central character, but for now, choose a name that suits their personality, decide on their age and general disposition, and let's get started—playing.

## CHILD'S PLAY

Let's try something—a game that requires you act on impulse, and resolve to be fearless and have a good time. This game is based on a classic children's story, no story in particular. If you've never read a children's story before (as one student told me), then either go out and read one or wing it. If you've ever done Mad Libs as a child, you be even better prepped for the silliness that awaits you.

I created a template which allows you to go wherever the story takes you. Even though the story here is a classic "hero conquers evil" whimsical tale, don't let that limit your story to a G rating. Don't be fooled by the simplistic language, and do not feel as though your story has to make too much sense.

Right now, I am writing a play about a guy who makes an awkward homecoming after being sent away from his family for the first 30 years of his life. Here's an example of my story:

Once Upon a time, there lived a little girl/boy named Frank. Only very special people knew that this little person had a gift. S/he could drink more alcohol than anyone thought was humanly possible, like no one else in the world. More than anything s/he loved to play with other's people's psyches and hated to dwell on his horrific childhood, which would end up being very important later in life.

Now you give it a try. Let your character out for the first time to roam and play. You do not have to read the template beforehand. Give yourself 20 minutes. Ready? Go.

## MY STORY

By \_\_\_\_\_

Once Upon a Time, there lived a little girl/boy named \_\_\_\_\_. Only very special people knew that this little person had a gift. S/he could \_\_\_\_\_, like no one else in the world. More than anything s/he loved to \_\_\_\_\_ and hated to \_\_\_\_\_, which would end up being very important later in life.

Growing up, \_\_\_\_\_ had a great/exceptionally difficult time. (Tell us why: \_\_\_\_\_)

The one thing S/he wanted more than anything was \_\_\_\_\_. S/he tried many ways of getting his/her dream. To name a few ways: \_\_\_\_\_

One day, his/her life completely changed because of \_\_\_\_\_. This launched him/her on a great adventure. The first major thing that happened was \_\_\_\_\_ and that amazing thing led to another amazing thing, \_\_\_\_\_

For a minute, it looked as though \_\_\_\_\_ was well on his/her way toward achieving his/her ultimate goal of \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_, but then a big monster came along in the form of a \_\_\_\_\_. This monster was a pretty major problem. Our hero tried so many different ways to get rid of the monster, to name a few: \_\_\_\_\_

For now, it looked as though the monster was behind him/her. "Gee, I think I'm going to achieve my dream after all," s/he thought to his/herself. "But now I'm finding I have a few philosophical questions I need to answer about life." Though this was unexpected, our hero went about trying to solve some major philosophical questions about life, like: \_\_\_\_\_. The way s/he went about solving them was by \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. By making this effort, s/he got closer to his/her ultimate goal without even knowing it.

Our hero was having quite a journey. Along the way, s/he made some friends named \_\_\_\_\_. They were really important because they helped our hero to \_\_\_\_\_. Our hero needed his friends, because otherwise he couldn't \_\_\_\_\_

But before any real success could be achieved, an evil demon got in the way. This one took the form of a \_\_\_\_\_. Our hero could see the glorious glow of \_\_\_\_\_ on the horizon. He tried to get away from the demon by using all of these very skillful skills like \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. It did/didn't work, and that led our hero to \_\_\_\_\_

But s/he persevered! Sometimes at night s/he found him/herself longing for \_\_\_\_\_, but comforting his/herself with \_\_\_\_\_. Little did s/he know, another mini-adventure was just around the corner. The sight of his/her dream (also known as \_\_\_\_\_) could now clearly be seen, but not touched. First our hero had to prove him/herself a warrior by \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. This made him/her feel \_\_\_\_\_. He then took action to \_\_\_\_\_ which proved his loyalty to his ultimate goal more than anything else.

What followed was like an explosion. Our hero did/didn't see it coming. All of a sudden, all the good, all the strength that was helping our hero make this journey just fell away. It was as though missiles were being thrown at his/her and s/he was expected to dodge them all alone. Here's how s/he did it: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_. Pretty impressive, huh?

When the storm calmed, our hero was very tired. S/he decided s/he needed to \_\_\_\_\_ in order to feel human again.

And then, unexpectedly, the dream was there, right before him/her. It was/wasn't what s/he had expected. It had evolved into \_\_\_\_\_. What made it evolve was the way s/he had \_\_\_\_\_. At the end of this marvelous and incredibly journey, our hero was changed. Before, s/he was \_\_\_\_\_. Now, s/he was \_\_\_\_\_. S/he decided that the one thing that was most important in life was \_\_\_\_\_ (Or, s/he never really understood that the meaning of life was \_\_\_\_\_ and took the lesser route of \_\_\_\_\_.) Our hero was/wasn't victorious.

THE END

## OUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOOD PLOT POINTS

If I had told you at the very beginning that you were about to plot out your story, you may very well have run away screaming. But that's exactly what you've just done. Chances are good that the template's language and phrasing isn't appropriate for your play's ultimate narrative, and so it's now your job to create a comprehensive narrative—one that represents your goals for your script, as well as your central character's goals (what he or she ultimately wants) which will serve as the driving force for your story.

Plot's basic skeleton is constructed of 5 main parts:

1. **Introduction:** when we find out who the characters are in your play, what the general setting is, and why we're all watching.
2. **Rising Action:** When each and every character is fighting to achieve their immediate goals and, most likely, coming up with obstacles. (Conflict creates drama—always remember that.)
3. **Climax:** When we see all of that wonderful conflict come to a head; it's usually a moment of great discovery.

**4. Falling Action:** When you allow your audience and your characters, whomever is left standing, to take a breather, digest what has just happened, and what will follow, once the curtain comes down

**5. Resolution:** or the denouement, is your last chance as a playwright to let the audience take home a message. It's Linda Loman's "Attention must be paid," in Arthur Miller's classic *Death of a Salesman*. It's the moral; it's the message. It's the end.

## THE "PERFECT PLAY" MYTH

All that said, playwriting is one of the-only places you truly can create your own world. Often my students will ask me if their plays have to be conventional, and I always shoot them a quick "Heck no!" with extra emphasis on the "no." I wouldn't tell anyone to do something I wouldn't do myself, and my plays have been as far from conventional as possible. Just because we're using words like plot and structure, doesn't mean your play has to adhere to any of the rules of kitchen sink realism or those that are presented as "well-made plays." The best theater takes soundly structured ideas and makes them fresh and personal. When Samuel Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot*, people famously flew out of the theater. At the time, they may not have been ready for his idea of plot, but his play certainly has one. And he found an original way to tell a story on stage that revolutionized theater forever.

"I think a great story is one in which you care about the characters and really want to keep reading/watching in order to see what will happen to them," says Liz Frankel, literary manager at The Public Theater. "There is a clear dramatic question hovering above the action, so you know roughly where the story is headed, but you can't predict the ending and find it both surprising and fitting when you get to it. The best story is one that you feel that you have never heard before, or heard told in this particular way. Great stories do not have to be told in linear or naturalistic fashions and, of course, many great plays break all the rules and are compelling anyway."

And when Frankel reads a play that falls short, when the playwright doesn't follow through and go all the way, it's a disappointment. "I feel frustrated because I wanted to know more than the author told me," she says. "And it's especially frustrating to see writers leave out the details necessary to bring their stories to life only in order to create a compact 90-minute drama. Sometimes, a play needs to be two hours long (or more!) in order to reach its own potential and provide a satisfying experience for its audience."

John Clinton Eisner, artistic director and co-founder of the Lark Play Development Center, agrees—believing playwrights have an obligation

to take risks and follow the beat of their own drummer. "Playwrights are natural leaders in any evolving society, bringing people face to face in the theater to learn about alternative perspectives and to inspire shared visions of the future," he says. "For these reasons, it is critical for playwrights to be attentive to their own passions and driving interests, rather than to dwell on what they perceive to be the demands of the market. The genuine artifact in theater is authentic emotional truth rooted in recognizable experience. Audiences know it when they see it; you can't fool them. Playwrights who remain true to themselves and their most deeply held values, while, at the same time, embracing an active dialogue with creative collaborators and audiences, are lightning rods for humanity against the storm of progress. It is a strange melding of iconoclasm, idiosyncrasy and a profound need to connect with others that makes for success in the theater in life as well as art."

So, a great big congrats goes out to you. You've accomplished so much in so little time today. You're on your way towards writing a new play! Just remember to keep fun at close hand, in case that killjoy called fear rears its ugly head again.