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FIRST I TALK, THEN YOU TALK: AN INTERACTIVE WAY TO TEACH PLAYWRITING TO NOVICES

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ABSTRACT

First I Talk, Then You Talk: An Interactive Way to Teach Playwriting to Novices

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This workshop demonstrates a reliable method of introducing the concept of playwriting to students at all levels of experience. While it is effective for theatre majors in their first Playwriting class, it works equally well with students who bring little or no theatre background or experience to an introductory theatre class. I have used it with similar results in both a Playwriting class consisting of majors and other students who were very involved in an active theatre program, and in an introductory class where a majority of students had seen little or no live theatre.

The goal of “First I Talk, Then You Talk” in the classroom is to demonstrate to students, over a period of several days, not only how a playwright works, but how s/he thinks while writing a play. Once students complete the process, and share the results, they gain a better understanding of how to read a play and how to visualize it, what can and can’t be accomplished on stage, the basic elements of character, setting, conflict and plot development, and limitations of the form.

The workshop is divided into several parts:

1. Division of workshop participants into two groups. Explanation of the basic rules, such as the purpose of the assignment, length of the product, importance of process over product, etc.
2. Designing the basics for two characters.
3. Selecting a setting.
4. Explaining the basic elements students must understand: distinct characters, keeping the story going, avoiding extraneous or unnecessary elements, use of conflict, limitations of the stage, and bringing action to a climax and appropriate ending..
5. Group writing of the beginning of a short scene, with each team responsible for one character. Basic information will be provided on the primary pitfalls students fall into during this phase, and demonstration of side-coaching for development of character, plot, and creating an interesting situation.

Note: The above five steps take two 50-minute class periods. The third class period is given over to step 7, below. Since attendees at this workshop are expected to be teachers of both theatre majors and Intro to Theatre students, with perhaps some playwrights in attendance, not only is the process telescoped in a workshop format, but attendees will move through the process at an accelerated rate.

6. Division of the groups into teams of two or four—depending on the workshop attendance—to write conclusions to the scene. Time constraints may limit these to synopses.
7. Sharing the results with the rest of the group.

Note: In a classroom setting, assigning only two students to read all of the versions aloud is more effective than requiring each group to read its own.

After “First I Talk, Then You Talk,” students are ready to read a playscript and are more interactive in its discussion than when they are only provided with introductory theory prior to reading their first script.