



# Writing a One-Act Play

A lot of professionals insist that writing a one-act play is even harder than writing a full-length play. So, here's some good advice to guide you. (Updated 2.2.13)

Resource: *You Can Write a Play* by Milton E. Polsky, 2002.

**“The motto for writing a one-act play could be” the following:**

***One sitting—One setting—One sighting***

This means that what the audience sees and hears on stage is unified in theme, setting, characters and plot.

## **Some more keys points to consider:**

**Plot:** “A one-act play usually explores a single dramatic action” as fully as possible in the short time allotted to this form.

**Dramatic Action:** “Dramatic Action is developmental. A central character has a goal...” In other words, they have a need or want which is blocked, so the central character must continue to find new **tactics** to get what they're after. “Dramatic action is movement in which characters develop, grow, and change or intensify patterns of development and relationship.”

**Characters:** “In a one-act, there is less opportunity to fully explore too many characters,” and the intricacies of their relationships become central to the plot. It might be helpful to know that there are **MANY** more women auditioning for plays than men, so you might want to consider this when creating your cast.

**Dialogue:** “Be wary of long, ‘talky’ speeches except when benefiting character.” We also frequently speak in partial sentences and/or get interrupted. Let that be part of your dialogue too.

**Setting:** “Usually one set is sufficient.” Also, beware of the passage of too much time without a way to have characters comfortably show or discuss it in the context of the piece.

## **Ask the right questions:**

1. Start by asking yourself: “What interests me?” and “What do I know that is unique to me?” Plays based in one's own interests and experiences are usually much more successful.
2. When exploring your ideas and their suitability for development into a play, ask yourself:
  - a. “What is happening?”
  - b. “Who is involved?”
  - c. “Where and when?”
  - d. And most importantly, “Why?”
3. When beginning to develop your dramatic action, keep asking questions related to “**want**,” as they will most successfully propel your action forward and inform your dialogue. REMEMBER: a “**want**” can be tangible or emotional.
  - a. What does the main character want? (love, revenge, power, treasure, etc.)
  - b. How will he/she try to get what they want? (**tactics**: beg, bargain, demand, flatter, etc.)
  - c. Do the supporting characters help or hinder the main character in getting what he/she wants? (relationship, obstacles)
  - d. Don't forget to consider the following: What do the supporting characters want that make them decide to help or hinder the main character? This keeps them from being caricatures and clarifies relationships.
4. As you are writing dialogue, ask yourself: “Like in real life, does each person have a unique way of speaking?” In short, dialogue aims to “be true to character, move the action along, be specific, economical, and believable.”