



37 Plays Resource Pack 3: Creating Compelling Characters

About 37 Plays

37 Plays is a new, nationwide playwriting project led by the RSC and their 12 theatre partners across the country. Its aim is to get the nation writing. We are inviting children, young people and adults, including established, emerging and first-time writers, to write the new comedies, tragedies, and untold histories of our time.

About This Pack

This resource is designed as a follow up to Pack 1: 'Finding Your Story' and Pack 2: 'Building the World'; the packs are a first step for anyone who has never written a play before.

This pack contains specific activities to support our film on character featuring playwright and actor, Jack Holden.

As any playwright will tell you, there is no set way of writing a play and this pack includes tips, hints and ideas from existing playwrights to get you started and support you along the way...

"You have to come back to how real people make decisions - inconsistently."

- Jack Holden, Playwright

Activity 1: What Makes Character?

We may have differing opinions about people's characters. How much is objective or subjective? How much do people generate or curate the outward appearance of their character? What situations make people show their true character?

This exercise works best in pairs. If you have a someone that you like to write with, you might want to start off with this activity with them. Or, if you're alone you can always write a list.

- Think of a recognisable person who would be widely identifiable by your peers, for instance the Queen.
- Try and give as much detail about the person you're thinking of without relying on physical characteristics. Instead, think of what makes them particular. For instance, for the Queen you might say, 'she has a love of corgis; she is a public servant; she is perceived as being dutiful,' etc.
- If you're in pairs, try and swap over once your partner has guessed the person. You should try and give as much detail as possible without giving it away too easily.

"When approaching character as an actor, you don't need every question answered, you just need anchors. Fundamental things you can build the character around."

- Jack Holden, Playwright

Activity 2: Freewriting

This exercise is ideal in getting us out of our heads and into a writing mood, almost like a warm-up before physical exercise. Give yourself permission to write whatever comes into your head. Don't worry about showing this writing to anyone.

To get started, some writers find it helpful to have a prompt. There are several websites which can generate random words to help get you on your way. For instance, randomwordgenerator.com

Example: *Wedding. Exam. Country.*

You don't have to write about these things, but you can if you want. You can simply write these three words 100 times in a row. Or, try writing with stopping and answer the question: Where am I from? Try not to think or plan. Just start writing.

Write for 10 minutes without stopping.

Take a look at what you've written. Does anything particularly stand out to you? Any strong images or emotions which have taken you off guard?

This exercise can be a helpful liberation. There can be nothing more intimidating to a writer than an empty page so it's helpful to quickly get over that barrier.

"A little bit of mystery and ambiguity is sometimes very exciting"

Jack Holden, Playwright

Activity 3: Character Investigation

A) Think of a **real person** in your life - past or present

While retaining their anonymity, write down 10 fundamental character traits which make them who they are. For instance: this person is affectionate, flamboyant, thoughtful....

Have a look back over your list and see which traits might be seen as contrary. For instance, the person you thought of might be affectionate but also short tempered.

B) Think of an **imagined person**

Now we work the other way around...Choose 10 fundamental character traits to put together a fictional character. Instead of list, try writing a biography for your imagined character. Instill them with equally contrary traits just as you did with the real person.

Might they be a flamboyant introvert?

C) Think of a **fictional character** from a book, tv show or film

Write a list of characteristics that make them memorable. Why are you drawn to them? What makes them unique?

No character details are wrong character details. Essentially, anyone can be an interesting, compelling character. The key thing to remember is to make them as specific as possible.

"In life, as in art, people do unexpected things so it's not about decisions being expected...in fact it's about setting up that rhythm or that type and then breaking it."

Jack Holden, Playwright

Activity 4: Presenting Character

Now we give those characters a name and we get them to describe themselves in a monologue. You should write in full sentences for this exercise.

- Think of three different scenarios in which to place your character, for instance a job interview, first day at school, a speed dating event.
- For each scenario, write a brief paragraph of speech with your character introducing themselves in the first person.
- What information do they reveal about themselves? How do they want to appear to the other person?

“Don’t be afraid of big characters... the theatre is a space where characters can be big... Be brave, go big.”

Jack Holden, Playwright

Activity 5: Active Monologues

By now, you’ve got to know your character quite well. Here is a longer writing activity to help you get to know them further:

- Choose a setting. Is it a school playground; a convenience store; Sci-fi convention; hotel lobby; deep woodland, etc.
- Give the character an objective: what do they want? This could be as routine as wanting to buy a cold drink on a hot day, or as huge as wanting to be the first person to create the atom bomb.
- Give the character an obstacle: what is preventing them get what they want? For instance, if they are at a sci-fi convention in a queue to meet a childhood hero, perhaps an over-eager rival fan is taking up the hero’s time. Or, have they arrived at a convenience store wanting to buy a cold drink only to find they’ve left their wallet at home, will they try to convince a stranger to buy it for them?

Try to generate **three different settings, objectives and obstacles** for your character. Spend **20 minutes** on each scenario and write a monologue for your character.

What did you notice about them in the three different scenarios? How did they present themselves based on the situation?

People reveal aspects of themselves in different situations. It’s an interesting exercise to test your character to see how they change, grow bolder, behave timidly, etc.

“Really crazy stuff might happen to your characters but what defines characters authentically is now they react to situations.”

Jack Holden, Playwright

Writers' tips

Further tips on creating characters from our writers:

“Be fluid – characters can change with drafts, and must always serve what is most useful to the play: what do you, the playwright, need from them?”

“Approach character from a ‘central dramatic question’. What is the question I’m trying to answer, however complex? Once you have identified the question - who are the most interesting people to explore that question? Who are the right mouthpieces? People you would expect - or indeed people you really wouldn’t.”

“Character = the decisions a character makes under pressure.” Stripping away the facade - what are people prepared to do. The things that are pressing down on them that causes them to do the things they do – in plays often under pressure/extreme circumstances.”

“What makes a compelling character? Irrationality, illogical and inconsistency”

“Allow characters to say what you wouldn’t always want to say yourself. Characters contradicting the audience’s own idea of them. “

Further Inspiration

Below are the names of the playwrights we worked with to create these ideas. Look them up and read their plays. The more you explore other writers’ worlds, the more you feed your imagination. At some point, all of these writers (including Shakespeare) had never written a play and didn’t know how to begin.

Amy Ng, Bea Roberts, Brad Birch, Chris O’Connell, Isabel Dixon, Ishy Din, Isley Lynn, Juliet Gilkes Romero, Nina Segal, Phil Porter, Rob Drummond, Sami Ibrahim, Jack Holden, Stephanie Dale.