



37 Plays Resource Pack 1: Finding Your Story

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 pack is designed as a first step for anyone who has never written a play before. It contains suggestions to help you find a story to tell. It is inspired by a short film featuring playwright, Juliet Gilkes Romero.

As any playwright will tell you, there is no set way of writing a play. In this pack you will also find handy tips from different playwrights on how they get started.

“Everyone thinks, dreams, and writes plays differently. There is no set way. But we are going to provide hints, tips, and ideas to get you started and support you along the way.”

- Juliet Gilkes Romero, Playwright

Activity 1: Observing People

“We are surrounded by people, friends, neighbours, strangers, work mates. Who knows what challenges or triumphs are faced every hour, every minute, every second of the day? What are their stories? Their lived experience of this street for example? This city, country, world?”

- Juliet Gilkes Romero, Playwright

This activity asks you to observe people around you and invent the beginnings of a story from what you see.

1. First observations (you may need a pen and paper or tablet to take notes if you want to)

Firstly, decide where you are going to look for your inspiration. You may decide to ‘people watch’ from your window, a cafe or on the bus. You might choose to visit somewhere you know well or a place you’ve never been to before.

As you people watch, consider the following things: What are they doing? How do they feel? Why might they be feeling this way? Where have they come from this morning and where are they going to next? At this stage, you may like to jot things down or just let the ideas gather and grow as thoughts.

Look at what they do or might be doing: are they having an argument, do they spill a drink or miss a bus? Ask yourself what the reason might be for what they are doing or how they might feel. Let your imagination fill in the blanks. For example:

- The woman tapping her foot: *Is she worried? Happy? Impatient for someone who is late?*
- A man drops a cup: *Is he nervous? Unwell? Trying to be noticed?*
- The distant figure, head bowed, dragging their feet: *Are they daydreaming? Dreading something? Escaped from somewhere?*

As you spot these things, the trick is to keep asking questions to see where you end up. Why? What if? Answer every question you ask with the first thing that comes into your mind and see how far this process takes you. For example:

- Why is the woman asleep on the bus? She has been up all night.
- Why? She was woken in the night by a sound in her cupboard.
- What made the sound? She crept out of bed to open the cupboard but found nothing there.
- What will happen if she misses her stop? She will be late for work and get into trouble.
- What is she going to do? She is going to stay on this bus anyway and go to see her friend who might help her find out what is in her cupboard.

Overheard conversations can be another good way of sparking the imagination: On a train, in the park, in a shop or at the school gates. You may even want to jot down lines that you hear people say.

2. Look closer (you will need pen and paper or tablet, something to draw with)

Choose one person that you observed from the above activity. (Or you may like to invent someone new or already have someone in mind). Time yourself for 60 seconds to write down the first thing that comes into your head to answer to these questions.

- Do they have a physical feature that is noticeable? E.g. long hair, soft voice, big hands
- Is there a taste they love? A smell they hate?
- What is one thing they are looking forward to?
- What is the best thing they have ever seen?

Now, think about where and how this person lives: Alone? With a large family? If so, what sort of family? Is it a place they stay away from or feel trapped in, or is it a happy home, a sanctuary? Is it a home with secrets?

Imagine you are a mirror and this person is standing in front of you. Look at them and decide: Do they have a secret? Is there something that troubles them from the past or something they are dreading?

Ask a few more questions: What are they doing right now? Where are they going? What is an average day for them? What might happen to them today that's out of the ordinary? Stories happen when people's everyday activities are interrupted.

Take some time to go over the questions that you have answered. If anything stands out to you as interesting or unexplored, keep asking. Highlight or underline anything that looks interesting and see if it begins to tell a story. Keep rearranging or answering questions until you have the beginnings of something you like. For example:

The woman dragging her feet feels despair.

- *Why?* She fell asleep on the bus on the way to work again and when she arrives, she might get the sack.
- *Why is she tired?* There's something that keeps her awake at night.
- *What does she dream of?* Someone she's lost.
- *Who?*

The more questions you ask, the more answers you'll have, giving you more ingredients for the beginnings of a story.

Writer's Tips

- What have you enjoyed recently on TV or which films do you love? Have you read a good book? What is it about them that you really like? Jot down some things you loved about them. See if there's something there that sparks your imagination. A brilliant character, location or atmosphere? The way the story is told or the order you find things out?
- What are you an expert in? You could write your story out of something you know loads about (e.g. boxing, dog walking, cooking, fashion, cleaning, gaming).
- Ask your friends what they think you should write about.

Activity 2: What's in the News?

"Check out a newspaper feature, a tweet or a social media post that surprises or shocks you. You may see something that excites you or makes your blood boil. I certainly see a lot of things that take my breath away in good ways and bad."

- Juliet Gilkes Romero, Playwright

This activity explores what stories may be hidden in or inspired by the news around us.

1. Find and retell a news story

Take a look at today's newspaper, a news channel or website that you like and choose a story that interests you. As you read it, write down or highlight any details, facts or words that stand out or that you find interesting.

As you do this, ask yourself some questions: Does this article make you feel a certain way? Is this a story you wish you knew more about? Why do you care about this article in particular?

Now look for the same story in a newspaper or online channel that you don't usually like or read. Is the story even there? Is it reported differently? Again, jot down any details that you find interesting for whatever reason, especially if they differ from the first report.

Take some time to look over these facts and ask yourself: What was it specifically that attracted your attention and why? How does it make me feel? How would it feel if these events happened to me or to someone I know? What would I do? Are there people involved who I can identify with? What are the unanswered questions?

Now imagine you are telling the story of this event to somebody. Choose which piece of information to start with and record yourself telling the story.

Fill in any gaps with your own ideas, especially if your story has no resolution. You can do this as many times as you wish. It might even lead to you telling different versions of the same story, just like the news articles.

When you have at least one recording, listen to it and observe the following: When did you seem really connected or excited by the story? Which details sounded convincing? Which bits did you leave out and why? What details did you invent and why?

See if you can write the story down from start to finish. You can set yourself a target such as: writing a 100-word paragraph or filling a page of A4. Remember, at this stage you can invent anything you like to make the story more interesting or more satisfying to you.

2. Retell a news story to a friend

Tell this story to an actual person that you know. Set yourself a time limit: Can you tell it in one minute? Five minutes?

As you tell the story, take note of how it is being received by your listener. Does this story grip them? Make them laugh? Leave them wanting more?

Decide if you would like your audience to ask questions as you go or at the end. This may involve inventing details to answer their questions. If you don't have an answer yet, make a note of the question so you can think about it later.

Remember to ask for feedback from your audience. What were they most interested in? Is there anything they wanted to hear more about? Were they satisfied by the outcome and why? What outcome would they have preferred?

If you are sharing ideas with another writer or have a writer's group, try swapping stories and repeating this activity on something that is unfamiliar to you.

Writer's Tips

- Write about something that means something to you.
- Is there a picture you have seen that you found inspiring? Or shocking? Or strange? Can you imagine the story that led to the picture being taken or painted or drawn? Or can you imagine what it would be like to be there?
- Start with a question that you don't know the answer to.
- Jot down overheard conversations.
- Keep a dream journal.
- Ask yourself what makes you angry. What are you excited by? Anxious about? Passionate about? Then ask yourself why.

Activity 3: Inventing From History

“Take a walk, check out the local buildings - who lived and loved here? You begin to see how stories can reach across time and space.”

- Juliet Gilkes Romero, Playwright

This activity explores the history immediately around you and how the lives of historical figures can be explored from a different point of view.

1. Explore and invent the secrets of old buildings

Take a walk along your high street and take note of any old buildings that were built for other uses, just looking up above the shops at the tops of the buildings. They will often tell you a different story about the street. Is there one that looks older or grander than the others? Is it vandalised or derelict?

Make a note of the names of these buildings and where they are. Take photos or make a sketch. You can even look at landmarks like road signs, an old church, a well-known river, canal lock, or nearby wood.

Choose one of these buildings or landmarks and do a quick online search to uncover its past (or look in your library’s local history section). Try to find out the following: Who lived there? What is their story? Why is the building or area being used differently now?

For example, we filmed our first 37 Plays film in Streatham and discovered the following websites full of inspiring facts and images: [**10 facts you didn't know about Streatham**](#) and [**Pictures of Streatham High Road and area.**](#)

Imagine you are someone who used to live or work in one of these old buildings, like the Locarno Ballroom. It could be someone you found out about or a person you invent yourself. Imagine they are there now, as it used to be. Study any old photographs you found or ones from a similar period. Thinking as this person, imagine the following: How long have you been in this building? What is a typical day or night like for you? Can you remember your first day here?

Write a diary entry from the point of view of your character. As you do this, consider the following: What can you hear and smell? What is the inside of the place like? Are you alone or in company? You can put a word limit on your entry: a paragraph or a page for example or simply write freestyle for as long as the ideas come to you.

Now imagine you are the same person visiting the building or place today. Write a new diary entry to explore your reaction. Consider the following: Is it a shock to see the differences? How do you feel? Can you still spot anything familiar?

Using what you have discovered and explored, try writing a paragraph about your building or place. Imagine this is going to be a plaque for the wall of the building to be read by the local people. Give yourself a limit (such as 200 words or one page). Tell them the story of your character, how their building changed over the years and why.

2. Find a new way to tell the story of a historical person

Choose a person from history that has always interested you. This might be recent history, a favourite author or artist, someone you once saw a film about, a world leader or ancient king or queen. In note form, write down why this person interests you and anything you know about them, e.g. Queen Elizabeth I was imprisoned in the Tower of London, never married and died standing up.

Spend no longer than 10 minutes investigating your chosen person on the internet or in your local library and add to your list. Choose one fact or event from their life. It can be a famous event that they are known for or a small detail you noticed along the way.

Now think of the people who could have been witness to this fact: family members, servants, audience members, soldiers.

Event: Princess Elizabeth is locked in the Tower of London.

Witnesses: A fellow prisoner watching from a window, the boatman who rows her through Traitor's Gate and the lady-in-waiting who accompanies her.

Choose one of these witnesses and imagine the event from their point of view. It doesn't matter if the link to your event is big or small. They could be the cook or Queen Mary herself, sending her sister to jail.

Take a piece of paper and divide it into 3 parts. In each part, write the following:

- Part 1: Your witness's feelings and actions on the day of the event, before it happens. Are they expecting what happens? If so, how do they prepare? If not, what are they doing? Who are they with?
- Part 2: Their experience of the event. What are they doing the second before it happens? How do they feel when it happens? What do they see exactly?
- Part 3: What happens afterwards. How do they feel now? How has it changed their day? Do they tell anyone?

Look over what you have written. Can you connect the facts in each part so they flow together more clearly or realistically or dramatically? This might involve adding more sentences, other observations or characters, things to fill the gaps or passages of time.

Imagine each part was a scene in a short play. List all the characters in each scene. Does this change? How do people enter or exit? What might they say?

If you are writing in a group, try this:

- Develop these scenes so they have a mixture of dialogue and non-spoken lines. These non-spoken lines may be stage directions or passages of description for a narrator.
- In your group (or with another writer), read your scenes out loud together, giving people parts, lines or stage directions.
- Invite feedback on your work and do write this feedback down. It is up to you if you want to act on it or not - it's your play.

Writer's Tip

Making mistakes, writing things and then starting again, trying things out, rewriting are all part of the process. You're not wasting time - it all has value. You can let yourself think, research, ask questions, dream before you write anything down. Or you can get started right away and let yourself try things. It's all part of writing a play.

Further Inspiration

The following playwrights contributed the hints and tips that we have included in this pack. At some point, all of these writers 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.

If you want to find out more about the stories they have written, look them up and read their plays.