

Drama Teacher Academy Live PLC

Distance Learning: Playwriting

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Lindsay Price:

Hello everyone, Lindsay Price here, co-creator of the Drama Teacher Academy, Vice President of Theatrefolk. We have both of our communities joining us this evening; our Theatrefolk community and our DTA community. Welcome everyone. Tonight we are talking about playwriting in a distance learning context. So not necessarily a traditional playwriting unit that we would use normally in the classroom, but how do we use playwriting to support your current situation, what you're going through right now?

Lindsay Price:

So I got a couple of things to mention. First of all there is a handout. There's a handout for this PLC. So when I say things like, "There's a page of first line prompts in the handout," you got to download the handout. Now if you're in the DTA, it's going to be above the chat box. That's where the handout lives. And on Theatrefolk it's going to be in the description.

Craig Mason:

If you're on Facebook it's in the description. If you're on the Theatrefolk DTA site it's above the chat.

Lindsay Price:

There you go. There's a voice in the crowd. Yeah, DTA above the chat box and the Theatrefolk on the Facebook page it's going to be in the description. And there is a chat box and a Facebook page comment, so if you have questions, if you're on the chat box, DTA, just throw them in there. And if you are on the Theatrefolk [inaudible 00:01:32] page, throw them in the comments. We have folks who are monitoring both. They will get the questions to us. It won't probably be immediate that the answers come, but we'll try and get as many to them as possible.

Lindsay Price:

So this isn't quite a traditional PLC, but I'm not alone. I have a partner in crime. I have with me the most with the host Mr. Matt Webster who is spent so much time also in the classroom and is a wonderful playwright, Matt. Now, Matt, what do you think of, what comes to mind to you when you think of about this concept of distance learning and playwriting?

Matt Webster:

I love this combination. I think it is a really winning idea to concentrate on playwriting because playwriting is tangible. Playwriting is something that the students can create, it can be created tangibly on paper, in a document that they don't have to video it, they don't have to upload in that way. It's document based, and because it's document based and writing based, it's a lot easier to share the information and to assess the quality of the work that's done. So there's a lot

of winning ideas that happen with playwriting as a distance learning tool. So, really looking forward to this conversation with you Lindsay.

Lindsay Price:

Absolutely. We're going to start with this notion of reinforcing knowledge. And Matt, when you hear reinforcing knowledge, what does that say to you?

Matt Webster:

Well, there are things that the students should have learned. There are things that the student should know and now this gives them the opportunity to put that knowledge into action and shows us that they in fact can use that knowledge in a tangible, realistic way. That's what it means to me.

Lindsay Price:

That's right. So we're going to start with small exercises that reinforce knowledge. We're not starting with moving forward with curriculum. We're just doing small exercises in a same day context. So like, here's a task, write, and then depending on your situation, submit, or not submit. You know what you're going through. And also that this is a way to practice monologue writing and scene writing. That's the core of what playwriting is. So, have students practice that monologue form and that scene writing form.

Lindsay Price:

Matt, is that something that you have done a lot of when working with students is just getting them to write monologues and scenes?

Matt Webster:

Absolutely, and in fact that's the starting point for me of playwriting. The idea that they can use these methods to begin to express themselves and learn how to use writing in a different way and writing dialogue and writing internal thoughts and things like that, really opens up a lot of avenues for students. And it gives them a different way to be creative. So I love monologue writing. I think it's a great way to start.

Lindsay Price:

And the one thing I'm going to say, though, is that with this idea of small exercises to reinforce knowledge, is that you want to have limits. So you want to not say to students, "Go write a monologue. Go write a scene." Because if you have insecure writers, that's going to do nothing to calm their fears. So you want to do half page monologues, one page scenes. That's my suggestion anyway. So that again, they're writing, they've got a small task, they have a small outcome, and a manageable outcome. And certainly you're going to have students who are like, "Well, I want to write a seven page monologue." And it's like, well, okay. But more often than not, your students are going to be thinking about other things right now. So just give them a, execute and complete is your mantra for this kind of exercises. So not think, execute. We want them to get the exercise, get it done, and have that sense of completion. Playwriting is something that you have to execute it. You don't want to ponder. You want to go. Yeah, Matt?

Matt Webster:

And Lindsay, also for the teachers, the more contained that you are in what your expectations of the students are and what the expectations of the writing are, the easier it is for you when you do your assessment, the easier it is for you to give some sort of grade or feedback on it. As Lindsay's saying, yes they can create something very, very large but it's harder for you to then control your feedback and give them what they need. So that's why that idea of starting small is something that is really good for you to help them stick with because it helps you keep their assessment on point.

Lindsay Price:

All right. And then the last thing I just want to say before we get to exercises, because we have so many exercises for you, is that you want in this kind of context it's a response framework. So it's not a creation framework, go write a monologue, it's a response framework. Again students don't have to think, they just have to respond, respond to a variety of things which we're going to get to right now. So let's go here and let's go, I've got so many things, there we go.

Lindsay Price:

The first exercise that we're going to look at is picture prompts. So that's what I mean by, what they could respond to. One of the things they could respond to is a picture. And you want to sort of guide them in the response. You want them to look at a picture, ask them some questions, and then come up with something in a theatrical form. This is my favorite, favorite picture. I've used this picture for years just because I think it is so wonderful to use for writing prompts. I love what students come up with. And I'll just remind you that there is a handout. This picture is in the handout.

Lindsay Price:

And then you just want to start by asking some questions. So where is this? Who's car is this? What was in the trunk? What happened five minutes ago?

Lindsay Price:

Okay Matt, if you're looking at this, what is the first thing that comes to your mind if you were going to say, "Where is this?" What would you say?

Matt Webster:

To me, it's kind of a wasteland. It's almost post apocalyptic or maybe a war zone. There's a whole lot that has happened here. And for me it's not just a car but it's that building in the background and the desolate landscape around it that really help tell the story.

Lindsay Price:

I know and the building's kind of off to the side a little bit.

Matt Webster:

Little bit of a tilt, yeah.

Lindsay Price:

Little bit of a tilt. So you just want them again to get in to a response framework. Give them questions and then give them a suggestion. So again, don't just say, "Go write that monologue." It's like, "A half page monologue from the owner of the car." So we have the owner of a car, they've answered some questions, and then they're going to write something specific. Or a half page monologue from the person who found the car. You're just giving students direction to writing. You're not helping them, you're not writing it for them. You're just opening some doors, which I think is really important in right now.

Lindsay Price:

Here's another great, great picture. I just love the, it's not the yellow brick road, it's the tire brick road we've got going here. So again, ask them questions, give them direction, and then have them respond.

Lindsay Price:

Okay Matt, so if you were going to give a suggestion for who might be the character to say this monologue, what would you think? What do you think would be?

Matt Webster:

I think the first thing that comes to mind for me is someone who wanders on to this path and is faced with what they're seeing here. They're faced with this trail of tires and then in the distance that car that's left there. And what brought them to this point? And where is it that they're going that has led them to this particular location? I think that's what pops into my mind right away.

Lindsay Price:

I like it. I like thinking about the idea of who put the tires here. So, "Write a monologue from the perspective of the person who put the tires down."

Lindsay Price:

And again, if you've got a student who says, "Can I do X, Y, Z instead?" In this context, let them do that. What you're doing is you're setting up parameters for your students who are insecure writers, who might be overwhelmed right now, who might be really stressed right now. And just giving them the framework within to write. But the point is always, execution and completion. So whatever's going to make your students get the idea, put it down, and finish in a small time frame, that's what you want them to do.

Lindsay Price:

You can also search for photos based on a specific emotion. And if everyone's really stressed right now or anxious or down and you... So perhaps give them a photo that pushes them to examine a picture in the opposite direction. So happiness, joy, celebration. So they're focusing on creating and writing for a happy character. So I just love the joy in this picture. So who is this person? Why are they happy? There's the questions. A half page monologue perhaps from the person who made them happy.

Lindsay Price:

Okay Matt so what is the thing that someone has said to this woman that makes her smile like that?

Matt Webster:

I think she got a compliment she wasn't expecting. I think something that really touched her heart and was unexpected is what it appears to me.

Lindsay Price:

Awesome. So, that's picture prompts. Another thing that you can do is personification. It's such a wonderful playwriting exercise because I adore plays that have characters that we don't normally see, characters who are concepts. Like jealousy as a character, or ghosts who are characters, or characters who are objects come to life. And any time you can do something like that it's going to be theatrical experience and a theatrical experience when we give human qualities to an inanimate object.

Lindsay Price:

So have students create a character for an object. And again they're not creating from scratch, they're responding based on their chosen object. And I would say if you had, let's say you have your students and you're doing this on a Zoom, say to them, "Okay, you have one minute, go find an object in your house." In the moment they have to go grab an object and then come back. Matt, do you have any objects right near you?

Matt Webster:

I do. I've got a lot of objects right near me.

Lindsay Price:

Okay. You grab an object right now. And then with the object have students answer some questions. So we're going to turn this into a character. Okay Matt what's the object that you found.

Matt Webster:

It is this spool of wire.

Lindsay Price:

A spool of wire, okay. So we need to come up with some personality traits. We need to turn this object into a character. I've got a stapler on the screen. Matt has a spool of wire. So we need to come up with a name. Okay Matt, what's the name for your spool of wire?

Matt Webster:

Wendy.

Lindsay Price:

Perfect. All right, a positive personality trait. So Matt, if the spool of wire had a positive personality trait, what would it be?

Matt Webster:

She's electrifying. See what I did there?

Lindsay Price:

Okay and then a negative personality trait?

Matt Webster:

She shocks people.

Lindsay Price:

The best friend?

Matt Webster:

The plug.

Lindsay Price:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)- Excellent. What is a secret that this character has?

Matt Webster:

Is terrified of water.

Lindsay Price:

And a pet peeve?

Matt Webster:

People being too close.

Lindsay Price:

Excellent. So what you've done is you've just taken an object and you've just basically turned it into a character with very tiny traits. Who's your best friend? What secret do you have? What pet peeve? But these are the things that make us unique as humans and you've just turned an object into a person. And then which of course what you want to do is now that there's source material for this character, students use this as a doorway and write a monologue or write a scene. Have students write a one page scene between the object and their best friend in which the conflict is either the pet peeve or the secret. Awesome.

Lindsay Price:

All right. Next. First line prompts. I'm going to say this often. It is not doing the work for students to give them a doorway, like a prompt, like a picture or like the first line of a scene or a monologue. It's so they don't have to look at a blank page. That blank page can be paralyzing. And not just for students, for every writer I've ever come across. Matt, what's your relationship with a blank page when you sit down to write?

Matt Webster:

It can be daunting. It can absolutely be daunting. Even if you have ideas in your head, the idea of starting, the idea of putting those first words, literally the first words on paper can make people freeze up and I know that it's caused me trouble from time to time so that's a great way to kick things in to gear.

Lindsay Price:

All right. You want to give students a first line that they're going to use. So let's say, "It was only a small nervous breakdown." But before they go any further, you want to come up, again, come up with some details so they're not starting from scratch. So a character name who might say this. Where is this character and who are they talking to? If you're doing a monologue, stress that there should be a listener so that the character who is speaking is speaking to someone. It gives the monologue focus, it gives it action instead of them talking to themselves or talking to the audience. Because those two, the audience and themselves, they don't really fight back in any way. And let's say the speaker's trying to convince the listener of something and the listener is resistant, now you've got character motivation and drive. So you've got a listener, you've got all that, write a half page monologue using the provided first line. And there's a page of first line prompts in the handout.

Lindsay Price:

And you also have first lines of a monologue. Offer some dialogue prompts. Give them some information that they can use to create that one page scene that I'm always talking about. And for when we have these scenes, you want to keep them short, keep it contained, two characters, one location, one page, and always give a suggestion. So, for example, two characters with a specific relationship. A mother and a son. One location; a kitchen. And a want for each character. This gives them something to do, something to talk about. So the want for the mother could be, "I want to go." And the want for the son could be, "I want to stay."

Lindsay Price:

Another thing you can do. Let's say you've got students and they're like, "All right I can write, I can do this. First line prompts, great. Dialogue prompts, great. Picture prompts, great. Give me something more." So do a form play. Keep it small. And just experiment with form, because there's so many types of theatrical expression: musicals, absurd plays, mime, Shakespearesque, written in iambic pentameter, poetic, Greek chorus. There's so many different things that you could use. So give them a prompt like that first line, "It was only a small nervous breakdown," and then give students a variety of forms from a menu. So how would they express this first line in a scene with no words? How would they use this first line in a elephant in the room scene? Which means there's a subject under this breakdown that no one is allowed mention. How would you make a musical number? How would you write this in iambic pentameter? Sky's the limit, it just gives a really interesting theatrical expression experimentation. And yes, there's a whole menu of forms in the handout.

Lindsay Price:

And this exercise is going to have students experimenting and maybe feeling with their idea. And that is a really good thing to happen right about now. To just kind of put it all out there and

let it kind of fail spectacularly. And it's a kind of a release. It's really a release to fail. And it's important to know that failing is a part of that creative process. And that's why it's important not to give students too much time to let them execute and complete. And if you have an opportunity to discuss say on a platform like Zoom, have them talk about what worked and what didn't work for them.

Lindsay Price:

Okay Matt, so that is our first section on small exercises.

Matt Webster:

Yeah, and I'm so excited to see the first line and the dialogue and those. I have done those exercises with students and one of the things that I love the most about it and I know the teachers are going to love as well, even though they're starting off with literally the same first line, the vast array of outcomes that you get, the creativity that the students present, and the way that you start to see their mind work, it's just fascinating. And it's a lot of fun to read it, to get the feedback, and for them to share it with each other. So yeah, these are great things for teachers to pick up and do and they will see great work from their students.

Lindsay Price:

I love that thing that you talk about that just because it's the same line doesn't mean its going to be the same work. It's absolutely fantastic.

Lindsay Price:

Hey voice from the crowd, do we have any questions before we carry on?

Craig Mason:

I think I might keep questions for a little later. Maybe you'll get to it. They're looking for a rubric. But I'm sure you're going to get into assessment.

Lindsay Price:

Oh, you know what? Okay. We can talk about that. Matt, put your thinking cap on about how we would assess these kinds of exercises.

Matt Webster:

Absolutely.

Lindsay Price:

Okay. So our next thing that we're talking about is playwriting as a form of expression. This is a time of stress and this is a time where your students aren't in your classroom. And that might be the only place they have where they felt safe expressing and sharing. And they might be in a place where they don't feel safe verbally expressing. So we don't want those thoughts and feelings to stay inside. I know for me as an adult human being, when I can get the things that are bothering me inside, out in some form, I always feel a modicum of, I feel better. So if we can provide an exercise for students that is on its surface is satisfying a type of work, playwriting work, but is also helping them, I think that that is good as well.

Lindsay Price:

Matt, do you use these kind of exercises, just in terms of using playwriting as expression?

Matt Webster:

Absolutely I have. And have always been amazed and touched and sometimes, when I say concerned it's only because they're sharing things that are such an important level that it warrants more feedback. It warrants keeping that connection with them and helping them find a way to express these things, which is what the arts do. It's why it's so important and why this kind of writing is so important. It allows you to express things that you might not be able to express otherwise. And these are very challenging times we are in right now. And I know a lot of students have a lot of feelings that it would be good for them to be able to figure out how to express them. So it's a great time for exercises like this.

Lindsay Price:

Awesome. Well then let's get to those exercises. All right. So we're going here and then we go here.

Lindsay Price:

So the first exercise that we're going to talk about is automatic writing or free writing. It is such a simple exercise. I find it so freeing. It's such a great way for students to get their thoughts out of their head and onto the page. And it's very, very simple. Students write non stop on a topic for a defined time limit. And the goal here is to not think and write non stop. So if students are stuck or they're just getting too much in their head and they're thinking too much, they are perfectly within their right to say, "I am stuck, I'm stuck, I'm stuck, I'm stuck, I'm stuck, I'm stuck, I'm stuck," for the entire time limit and they have achieved the goal of the exercise. They have executed and completed. This is a wonderful exercise if students are thinking and worry and it's a good way to get their thoughts out.

Lindsay Price:

So they get a time limit. They either self time using their phones or if you have a timer on your end, you use that. Two minutes, give them a topic. "What are you worried about today?" Start the timer and tell them to write without stopping. Don't worry about formatting or punctuation. Just get their thoughts out. There's an automatic prompt sheet in the handout. If you are trying to do something a little bit more detailed or complicated or maybe you want to really get into theater history, this exercise would be a good one to start with just so that everybody is transitioned from the outside world into where you need them to be. It's such a great exercise because you can do that transfer. You can use it as a brainstorming tool. Give them a topic and have them write everything and anything that comes into their mind on that topic. Use it as a way to write through writer's block, writing character, write on an issue they're having, answer why am I writing today, why am I here? It's really good.

Lindsay Price:

A scar monologue. So there are all types of scars. And scars can mean many things. There's mental scars, there's physical scars, emotional scars, there are symbolic scars. So in this exercise students can express their feelings through a theatrical expression. So have students

write a half page monologue but there's a bunch of different options. Someone with the scar. So what does that mean? What is their relationship with the scar? What conflict do they have with the scar? What does it mean? What does it represent? What does it symbolize? You want to emphasize that this is an exercise in theater. So we can't really think about the theatricality of that symbolism while they're getting whatever's going on inside them out. Or it could be someone looking at a scar, so it's sort of a distance thing. So just that creating a little bit of distance. Again, what does the scar mean? What does it represent? What does it symbolize? Or write from the perspective of the scar itself. We're doing that personification thing. So now we're like really on the inside. What is this scar thinking about?

Lindsay Price:

Opposition scene. Have students write a two person, one location, one page scene about what they're currently feeling. And have it so that at the end of that one page, what's the outcome of the emotion or whatever it is they're currently feeling? And then tell them to turn it on its head. Put characters in the opposite emotional state. So how do they act? What is that opposite emotional state? And so then what's the opposite outcome? So just getting students to, if they're going in to an anxious place, also have them explore what is the opposite?

Lindsay Price:

Turn emotion into a character. So again this creates a little bit of distance, right? So if you're turning anxiety into a character, well give them three visual aspects and what do they look like? Are they tall and thin and lanky? Are they short and stubby? What are they wearing? What color do they wear? Is it tight and constricted? Is it long and flowing? What does this character sound like? What words do they use? What's their favorite movie, song, and food? I love this question for particularly with characters that are concepts. Like what would anxiety's favorite food be? Would it be like an artichoke or a pomegranate because it's really hard to eat and you have to get those seeds out, it's very anxiety inducing? Or what would their least favorite movie, song or food be? And then a scene between the emotion and themselves.

Lindsay Price:

And then sometimes you need to write the ridiculous. Whatever your situation is, you need to take a fish and you need to apparently stick it in a field. This picture is pretty wonderful to me. So have students write a scene that goes farther than the opposite, it goes all the way into the ridiculous and just have things that don't make any sense. Write a one page scene that takes place on top of chairs. So there's chairs and no one's allowed to touch the floor. So what's the situation? What will happen when these characters touch the floor? Is there a consequence? Is there an electric field, something's happening? The white queen in *Through the Looking Glass*, she said, "Sometimes I believed as many as six possible things before breakfast." So write a one page scene that takes place in the kitchen during breakfast and six impossible things have to happen in the scene, in the one page limit. So just make it completely over the top.

Lindsay Price:

So character bios, they're common exercise when students are working on a play. But this character bio is not about an external character but an internal character. So students have to write a bio about the character they know the most about themselves. So this gives the students an opportunity to again express themselves, get some stuff out, and also, which is a wonderful

little side note, it makes them realize how much detail has to go in to an actual bio for a character. So all of these questions are in the handout. Some of them are, What do I like about myself? What do I dislike about myself? Do I typically carry objects with me and why? I love this question. Matt, are you an object person?

Matt Webster:

Oh, yeah. When I leave the house I'm always doing the check to make sure I've got my glasses, my keys, my wallet, my watch, and my phone. My phone's been added in the past couple years. So yeah, objects have to be with me when I leave.

Lindsay Price:

We've all added the phone, haven't we?

Lindsay Price:

And so the handout also highlights to say to the students, "You are the character. So you know all the answers. This is not a test, you know all the answers. But because this isn't a test, it's more of an expiration, you don't have to answer every question. You don't have to get overwhelmed. Write in the first person and just think about how you're going to share this story. So that if someone reading this story would understand this character who was you. So what is your truth? Why are you the way that you are?"

Lindsay Price:

Another thing where you can relate students personal expression to character is through point of view sentence starters. So characters need a point of view, that's what makes them interesting. And so a really good place to start is to have students express their own point of view on a variety of topics. So the students receive a sentence starter like, "I firmly believe that..." or "My point of view on the environment is..." or "In 10 years I see myself..." and their job is to finish the sentence aiming for about half a page. And again, there's a page of prompts in the handout.

Lindsay Price:

Okay. That, Matt, is our little talk about exercises as expression. Is there anything that I'm missing, you think?

Matt Webster:

No, these are great examples and exercises. What I really like as well Lindsay is there's kind of a progression. There are simpler ones. There are ones that require just being engaged, just creating something. Like you said, "I'm stuck, I'm stuck, I'm stuck." As long as they are engaged it's fine. Up through some of those absurdist ones that are going to be a lot more challenging but we have those students. We have those students who are ready for that kind of work, who need that kind of challenge for them to be able to get the engagement in full force. So I think it's really great that we've got the scale of work that can be done from basic introductory involvement through really thought-provoking writing. So yeah, it's a good mix.

Lindsay Price:

Awesome. Our next thing that I want to talk about is practicing the elements of playwriting. So, instead of thinking about okay in this set distance learning scenario I'm going to put together a whole playwriting unit and we're going to go through all the steps. And when you may or may not, A have the time, or B have the execution and the outcome, want to practice just the elements. These are the essential parts of making a well made play. So it's kind of like you're preparing for the time when you are together and then you can just, everybody's going to be an expert at all the pieces and then they just need to know how to put them together. So it's like exactly what I just said.

Lindsay Price:

So we're going to talk about looking at ideas and show don't tell and character and conflict. So let's get to those exercise. You got anything? Are you thinking Matt? What is that?

Matt Webster:

Well I am thinking and going back to the idea of assessment. I'm in my brain looking at the difference between these two areas and how we look at them. So absolutely, plow forward, and we will continue that thought.

Lindsay Price:

Awesome. Okay. We are, I have things to click and now we're looking at ideas. So we're going to start with ideas. And when you want your students to become experts at creating play ideas, you actually don't want them to create. You want them to generate. Get them in the habit of generating ideas rather than creating. And actually, in a distance learning situation, this is a perfect thing. Tell them to generate five ideas every day for a week. One idea every day for a week. Just get in the idea of not worrying about creation but generating. Because when you say creating it sort of sounds special like a magical unicorn shot out of your head and slid down a rainbow and there's a perfect idea, which doesn't happen.

Lindsay Price:

And what you really want to do is you don't want to make ideas precious, because ideas are not plays. Ideas are not books. Ideas are not movies. They are not finished products. They are just the start and they change. They are just A on the way to Zed or Z, depending on where you are in the world. And there's a reason you cannot copyright an idea; because they're not that important. But you can copyright the execution of an idea. As I've been saying, execute, complete. Execution is king.

Lindsay Price:

So how do we generate ideas? All right, so let's look at that. Observation is one of the most useful methods for gathering play ideas. So to observe as a writer is to look at things specifically, to look at the world around them specifically. People, place, and things. Look up when everyone else is looking down. Look for things that are out of place. Listen to the conversations around you. So students are going to observe and then explore in a theatrical context.

Lindsay Price:

A place observation. So to practice observing, students write down a description of the room they're in currently using the five sense. Now hopefully none of your students are staying in rooms like this, but doesn't it invoke the senses? That's why I chose it because it's like, I can see, I can totally smell, I can hear, I can texturize. Even though I'm not going to taste anything but I between you there's mold in this room. And mold you can just sort of taste it. Blegh.

Lindsay Price:

So you want to just get them to start being specific. That's what this is all about. So where are they? Are they in their bedroom? So what does that look like, sound like, smell like? What are the textures? What does it feel like? Is there a pizza under the bed? What are some tastes that can maybe be conducted to smells or over air conditioned rooms have a taste. That kind of thing. Are you near the kitchen? Smells are always connected there. Think like a writer.

Lindsay Price:

And then you want to always test an idea to see if it has theatrical legs. And not every idea does, that's the whole idea. You don't want to make ideas precious because not all of them work. In fact, most of them don't work. But if you're always in the idea of generating ideas, you're always trying to get ideas down, then you never run out of them. And if you make them gems when they don't work that's how you get writer's block.

Lindsay Price:

Choose one of the observational elements. So they've observed the room using the five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. And turn that observational element into a character. So something you saw, a scarf on a chair. Something you smelled or something you heard and turn that into a character. So think about it. How would you personify a smell? What would they look like? What would they sound like? Would they be happy? Or drippy? Turn it into a character. And then write a paragraph from that character's perspective. What does this character want? Who are they talking to? Again, make sure they're talking to someone or something in the room, not to themselves. For example, you saw a scarf on a chair and the scarf was talking to the chair and it's about how its owner Dana is wearing a new scarf and has forgotten all about them and the scarf fears becoming a hand-me-down.

Lindsay Price:

So that's an external observation. And that's something that... Have students go to a different room in their house every day and observe it using the five sense. Have them sit and look outside and see what they can see outside. Have them go to a park and just sort of look at what they see.

Lindsay Price:

Next, internal observation. Everyone is a great source of information when it comes to generating play ideas. So students observe themselves by identifying a point of view on three different topics. So for example, "My point of view on a fast food tax is..." "My point of view on depression is..." "My point of view on failure is..." And then they complete the sentences, choose one, and they're going to write a two character, one location, one page scene called, Opposition Elevator. So in Opposition Elevator, two characters are trapped. Where? In an elevator. And they have opposing views. And so they have to get into a conversation about the topic. And one

person has the same point of view as your students and the other person has the opposing view. So how does this conversation end when they're locked in a place that they can't get out of? And how does the scene end and what tactics does each one use to try and convince the other of their point of view?

Lindsay Price:

So what if there's a topic students want to explore and they want to turn that into an idea for a play? So how do we turn topics into play ideas? I use this method all the time and we're going to use sentence starters. This has got a little bit of a process to it. We're going to use the topic of jealousy. So let's say we have a topic and it's jealousy and we're going to turn that into a play idea.

Lindsay Price:

So the first thing is to automatic write for two minutes on the topic. It just helps just get the ideas out on the page so that when students then go on to the next step, they're not staring at blank page, they've already had two minutes of thinking to move this forward. And then they're going to complete four sentence starters on the topic. "I wonder...", "What if...", "If only...", "Why does..." So, for example, "I wonder why she's so much better at this." "What if jealousy didn't exist?" "If only jealousy wasn't such a monster." "Why does it matter so much?" Students choose the one that speaks to them the most. If you're having a virtual class, have students share their sentences. I am always amazed at what students come up with. I did this exercise once with a group of grade nines. The topic was birthdays and for some reason they were all about, "What if my life..." it was a very existential thing that I didn't expect. So the topic doesn't have to be deep to get good work. And then, write a half a page monologue. You've got to use that sentence to write the [inaudible 00:40:53] write a half page monologue using their chosen sentence as a first line.

Lindsay Price:

So that's kind of coming up with ideas. Hey Matt do you do any other kind of idea work?

Matt Webster:

Yes, and I've worked with students as well on the idea of group work. And this might be something that could be interesting in a distance learning idea as well, is that if you have the opportunity to Zoom students or get small groups of students together that they can share ideas and agree on a common theme to work on, then you can once again create those different strands, those different expectations of where something goes. And the idea starts in one place and goes somewhere else. The students themselves once their invest in an idea, I've found that they often are very motivated to create more work from that idea. It's great that there's that opportunity for them to work together in that way and to add something to the topic. I like that idea a lot.

Lindsay Price:

Okay, now we're going on to the next thing. The next element we can focus on is that in the theater we want to show not tell. We don't want a story telling play, we want a play where characters show the story. We want the characters to, we want to show characters having an emotion, right, slamming of a door. We don't want characters to tell us their emotion. "I'm

angry." We want to show a relationship through character action rather than having them tell the audience information. This is one of the biggest things I find. And it's not just student writers, it's all writers of a sort where there's a lot of telling of information rather than characters having experiences. So practice show don't tell. So we're going to practice in this exercise, showing relationships rather than telling relationships.

Lindsay Price:

So have students choose a relationship. And they're going to write a two character, one location, one page scene. And to show the relationship, what that means is that if your chosen relationship is a father and a son, these characters are not allowed to use the words father, dad, or son in the scene. The actions of the characters, the way they interact, the way they talk to each other, and the dialogue around that action shows the relationship. So for example, if the father says, "Hey, have you finished your homework? I got us tickets to the Raptor games." The raptor games. "The raptor games. It's when the t-rex's and the raptors they attack each other." That gives us an indication of relationship without father saying, "Hey son, have you finished your homework?"

Lindsay Price:

Character. Choose a relationship, two characters, and the dialogue prompt page in the handout has a ton of possible two character relationships. Teenager and her sister, two best friends, a ghost and a scientist, a coach and an athlete. Choose a location: kitchen, bus station, library, lab, track. Write a conversation between the two characters without using any identifiers and do a one page scene.

Lindsay Price:

Okay. Characters. Now next we move on to characters. And character is one of the backbone elements of a good play. Plays need fully developed characters. Characters show the story, they have emotional reactions with what's happening. They pursue a want, they deal with obstacles in the way of the want, which is conflict, more on that in a second. And they either succeed, which usually happens in comedies, or they fail, most tragedies, in getting what they want. The biggest connection an audience has is with your audience. And this is the prime goal of the play. We want to communication to an audience. So if we can get students in this time to just practice developing character, you're pretty much golden.

Lindsay Price:

You can even ask students to give you five memorable characters they've come across in plays or movies and why are they memorable? Why did you connect to them? Positively or negatively? Get that connection in to their head. And if they know what it is that made them connect to something or someone, then maybe they can put it into their writing.

Lindsay Price:

A really exercise is to have students create a character profile. Humans are made up of the small details, this is what makes you specific, and that's what's going to make your characters specific. So the more they get in to the habit of creating more small details, the easier it will be to write for them.

Lindsay Price:

So have them choose something that they've written already, a monologue or a scene. Pick a character from that text and they're going to complete a character profile for one of those characters in that chosen monologue or scene. And in some of the questions, again it's in the handout. So you're looking at who's in your immediate family? Who's your most important relationship? And then little tiny details. What clothes do you like? what food do you like? What music do you like? What choices do you make? We make very specific choices when it comes to clothes, food, and music. And we make very specific choices about clothes, food, and music that we hate. And that is going to make unique characters.

Lindsay Price:

After they've created these details, students write a half page monologue for which they speak to someone about what they chose to wear and why. Or what they chose to eat today and why. And make sure there's an identified listener, either someone in their immediate family or their most important relationship. Think about why the speaker is sharing this information and how it fits with their personality or the personality of the listener.

Lindsay Price:

If you're in a virtual classroom, have students read their monologues aloud and then have them go back to that original text. The characters probably changed because they've written so many details about them. Can they do another draft of that original monologue or scene based on this new information and these new details that they have done.

Lindsay Price:

And last in this section, we're going to just talk about conflict because character and conflict, they go hand in hand. Plays need conflict. Conflict is the action. Conflict is the problem to solve, the thing that makes a character's smoothly running life not so smooth. It takes the straight line and makes it jagged. When writing falters, more often than not it's because there is no conflict. And theatrically I like to describe conflict as the thing in the way of a character getting what they want. That's why character and conflict go hand in hand.

Lindsay Price:

You want conflict that directly affects a character. So not a sofa, not a building, not a tube of toothpaste. We want something in the way. So for example, let's say the character wants pizza. "I want pizza." So obstacles that could be in the way is it could be man versus nature. There's a huge snow storm and the pizza can't be delivered. It could be man versus man. There's someone telling the guy he can't have pizza, he's not allowed to eat the pizza. Or if it's a girl who wants a pizza, maybe she's a pageant contestant on a diet and she's going crazy and her mom's denying her pizza, or we're all sitting in our houses and there is no pizza. It could be man versus self. The girl wants pizza but she's the one who stops herself her own mind tells her that she can't; have it. How's she going to fight herself? How's she going to fight that obstacle and still try and get what she wants? Man versus self is a great obstacle. How many people do we know who say they want something and yet in their own mind it's their own fear and their own insecurity that stops them?

Lindsay Price:

No, conflict has to also be important and urgent. Wanting pizza is certainly a true want but we don't have a lot of plays out there about people who want pizza. It's not very theatrical or extraordinary. So that means we have to have a want which is important, because if it's important, that means the character cares. And we have to have a want that's urgent because that means it has to happen today or else. A guy wants pizza. He cares about eating pizza, but if he doesn't eat pizza today, what will happen? What are the consequences? Is it his last meal before the electric chair? I don't know.

Lindsay Price:

So if there are obstacles in the way of an important and urgent want, a character is going to take action. And those actions are the tactics. So now we have direction. That's the blueprint for theatrical writing and that is the conflict formula, which is a character wants, and then we have some sentence starters which students can use to fill in the blanks. "I care because..." That's making it important. "It must happen today or else..." That's making it urgent. "The obstacles in my way are..." Obstacles. "The things I'm going to do about it are..." Those are your tactics. Oh I should say too, there is a character formula page in the handout which has a specific exercise that you can try where the character is a grandmother and her want is, "I want revenge." So think about that for a moment. Think about how students can fill in the blanks for, "I care because...", "It must happen today or else...", "The obstacle in my way is...", "The thing I'm going to do about it..." and the character's a grandmother and the want is, "I want revenge." Haha.

Lindsay Price:

And then you can string it all together, if you wanted to. They could string it all together in a scene. Generate ideas, come up with the character, write a character profile, fill in the conflict formula, write it, and don't forget that they have to show and not tell. So you could have them do it on the topic of birthdays, like the one I did with the grade nines.

Lindsay Price:

Okay. Matt, as we are closing up here, let's talk about assessment.

Matt Webster:

Yes. So, looking at what you've laid out and kind of the first half and the second half with the writing exercises and then the different elements. The writing exercises, I think what we want to keep in mind at this point is keep the assessments relatively broad. At this point we're all still trying to work out how the distance learning works. We're trying to make sure our students are with us as we're putting this material together. We may not have good internet, we may not have good contact with them. It may be sporadic. So don't make it something that's very heavy handed in the assessment that you do and make what you're assessing very broad and very general.

Matt Webster:

For example, in the free writing, it's just do it. If they do the free writing, that is a check. That's a plus. That is something that you can assess as a positive. And then if there's various simple

parameters to it such as the page length is half a page. It's supposed to have two characters, there are two characters. Really keep that in mind early on here in the process as we're kind of working through distance learning under these circumstances and what we're working with our students. So be able to create assessment but keep those assessments very broad and very general.

Matt Webster:

Now, as we get to the larger, the second part that Lindsay's put together with the elements, this great detailed information of things that you can be working on, I would say look at a very specific element in each of those and focus on that element in an activity, in a writing activity. What Lindsay has put out at this point is literally a 45 minute master class on playwriting that you could build an entire semester around. These are not activities that you're going to get done in one or two sessions. These are things that can go on for a decent amount of time. And as such, make sure you kind of break them down into bite size pieces. Make sure that you have very specific learning outcomes that you are assessing your students on.

Matt Webster:

And once again, be broad in what you're doing because the limitations that you have in your communication with your students and time limits and not having control over a lot of those things tells you that you don't want to put a whole lot of emphasis, a whole lot of grade weight on these things. Give you students the opportunity to succeed at it. And then take those successes and grade accordingly based on very specific outcomes you were looking for. That's kind of the general assessment information I'd give at this point Lindsay.

Lindsay Price:

Awesome. I understand we have two questions. Voice from the crowd, what are the questions?

Craig Mason:

When you're doing the picture prompts, would you do just one per session or would you do multiple throughout the session?

Lindsay Price:

I would do one per session. I think that that's something that is a really great warmup. It's a really great way to spark their imagination. It's a really great win, actually. A lot of this stuff right now is I think you really want to focus on those solid execution and completion wins. So do the one and have them succeed at it, and then move on to something else.

Craig Mason:

Right, because then you could yes, and to whatever they've done too, if they're inspired by what they've-

Lindsay Price:

Absolutely. You can yes, and it so you could take it and you want them actually to spend the time on the, if they're going to write the monologue, you could yes, and it and write a character profile. You could take the monologue and yes, and it and then turn that into a scene. And then you can make sure that there is a well defined conflict and do the conflict formula.

Craig Mason:

And a lot of that's part of Scene Spurs, isn't it?

Lindsay Price:

Well, yes, you should make sure that you have downloaded Scene Spurs. You can find that in Theatrefolk on the distance learning page on our website. And DTA you also have Scene Spurs as part of the distance learning collection. In there, that's all picture prompts. Picture prompts, there's automatic writing suggestions, there's questions to answer, and then there's a myriad of monologue and scene suggestions.

Craig Mason:

Great, now this one I know you've done many, many things on.

Lindsay Price:

Oh, good.

Craig Mason:

I'm throwing you the softball to finish out. Once they're actually writing scenes, they're into actually crafting their scripts-

Lindsay Price:

Yes, once they're into writing scenes?

Craig Mason:

What can they do, the teachers, to help the students avoid writing bad movies of the week or movies, car crashes, all that type of stuff?

Lindsay Price:

It's character and conflict. Have them complete that character profile. And make sure that the details that they write for that character are actually making their way into the script. And then when you have them write that scene it's one location, one page, two characters. No car crashes. It's not going to take place in a car crash. It actually has to take place in a location. Have them describe the location. Have them, it's one location so there's no five lines and then they're going to cut to a new scene. It's one scene. Have them complete the character... I find the conflict formula, "I care because...", "It must happen today because....", "The obstacles in my way are...", and "The things I'm going to do to make it happen....", those solve so many stereotype issues because they have to create a character who cares. And that solves a lot of those kinds of issues when you have characters who care. Now they can make bad decisions. Great characters make awful decisions all the time, but if it comes from a place of caring, that's what's going to solve your problem. Is that good?

Craig Mason:

Yeah.

Lindsay Price:
Excellent.

Lindsay Price:
Hey Matt, do you have any last words for our playwriting distance learning folks?

Matt Webster:

I do. It's so wonderful Lindsay, thank you so much for sharing this information. I know that teachers are going to be thrilled to have all of these materials at their fingertips to be able to use. You've given them a lot to work there and a lot of opportunities. One of the things I want teachers to recognize is that at this point we know that we are an anchor for our students away from school. We know we've got a personal connection with them and whatever we can do to maintain that connection through these times is going to be valuable for them. So this kind of opportunity for them to express themselves creatively, express themselves, in writing, and stay in contact with you, gives them that anchor towards, school, towards normalcy, and towards their peers and their friends that is so incredibly valuable at this time.

Matt Webster:

So thank you for what you're doing. Keep on keeping on. Keep doing it. Go ahead and start putting the things that Lindsay has put in front of you into action and you will see some terrific results when your students get engaged. Stay strong.

Lindsay Price:

Awesome, thank you so much for joining us here tonight, everybody. I wish you all well. I wish you all sanity. You guys should all do that automatic writing exercise too. Do it for yourselves. Take that emotion that you're feeling and turn it in to a character, and put it in a really bad outfit.

Craig Mason:

There were comments in the chat room about how people actually didn't want to do this with their class, they just wanted to do it for themselves

Lindsay Price:

Good, you do. You do. Whatever is going to help you. I know how many of you, all of you, all you want is to be there for your students. All you want is the best for your students. And anything that I know how much you guys are going to work to make that happen. So please take care of yourselves and stay safe. Stay healthy and we'll see you real soon.