



Sample Pages from
Write Your Own Vignette Play

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Write
YOUR OWN
VIGNETTE PLAY



Lindsay Price

Write Your Own Vignette Play
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Introduction

You want to work with your students to write and perform an original play.

BUT...

- You don't know where to start.
- You've never written a play before.
- You don't know how to corral a mass of ideas into a single focused piece.
- Your students have never written a play before.
- You have students who don't feel creative.

WRITE YOUR OWN addresses all these issues and offers a step by step process from choosing a theme, to generating source material, to using improvisation, to a final draft.

Use WRITE YOUR OWN with a class, drama club, or summer group to write a play.

This volume of WRITE YOUR OWN covers the Vignette Play. The Vignette Play is an easily adaptable format which applies multiple strategies (brainstorming, planning, experimenting, communicating, revising, presenting) and is an excellent method for group-created original theatre.

It works especially well for groups with varying levels of confidence when it comes to writing. By the end, all students will feel able to contribute to the writing process regardless of natural writing ability.

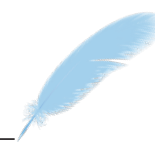


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Chapter One: What is a Vignette Play?



What is a Vignette Play and why is it suitable for original play creation?

A vignette is a short scene. A Vignette Play is a script made up of vignettes, centering on a theme.

So instead of the play having one story with a beginning, middle and end, each scene is a complete story. Each scene shows a different take or interpretation of the theme. Each scene can explore a different style, from traditional, to monologue, to tableau, to abstract, to musical.

VIGNETTE PLAY EXAMPLES

I have written a number of Vignette Plays:

WAIT WAIT BO BAIT

Theme: Waiting

Scene Examples:

- Two boys wait outside the principal's office awaiting their punishment.
- A girl waits by the phone for a boy to call her.
- Kids waiting to open their Christmas presents.
- A girl wants to know how long she should wait for the man of her dreams.
- A student worries as she waits to make a class presentation.

THIS PHONE WILL EXPLODE AT THE TONE

Theme: Communication – how we do and how we don't.

Scene Examples:

- Two girls talk about their troubles in the middle of the night.
- A boy works up the courage to ask a girl out.
- Dealing with an obscene phone caller.
- Two guys have the worst conversation ever.
- The phone police.

HAIRBALL

Theme: Hair

Scene Examples:

- A boy wants to know how long he has before going bald.
- A girl gets angry at her boyfriend when he insults her hair.
- A girl with cancer tries on wigs.
- The bad haircut.
- The psychology of the hair puller.
- Going blonde, Shakespeare style.

The possibilities are endless when it comes to the Vignette Play. Any avenue is possible: teen issues, school issues, the environment, current events, historical events, headlines, war, the economy, the list goes on.

WHY USE THE VIGNETTE PLAY?

Flexible Casting: Because the play focuses on short scenes, there isn't a set character list. If you have actors who are showing less commitment, if you have actors who drop out, if you have actors who want join in, you can change the casting.

Broad Appeal: This format is excellent for a variety of groups. It works well as a project for a class that has little theatrical experience. It works well for a drama club that wants to write their own play for competition. It works well in a summer camp scenario where participants may not know each other well.

Flexible Rehearsals: With multiple scenes, you can have more actors working at the same time, rather than actors sitting around until their turn onstage.

More Control: There's more control in multiple authors writing multiple short scenes, rather than trying to co-ordinate a group to agree on and write one single story.

The Ability to Give Students Control: The class play project is an excellent student-driven assignment. In some situations it has been used as a final exam. The project allows you to observe the work ethic of your students, their team-building skills, how they handle the decision-making process when they are in control. These are all assessable skills that rely less on the difficult-to-quantify notion of "creativity."

Multiple Authors: It is easier to encourage different writing voices in the absence of a single story. Scenes can have different viewpoints, different tones, and explore different genres. Actors who take part in the creation feel more ownership of the play.

Economical Staging: Vignette Plays work best with sparse staging and costuming. With multiple short scenes, it's better to have a unit set (cubes and risers) that can be used over and over again instead of a specific set for each scene. A specific set requires the play to stop every two to three minutes for a scene change, breaking the flow of the play. The same applies for costuming. Use a neutral costume that works for all the scenes with perhaps some hand props or small costume pieces that can be easily and swiftly added on.

HOW LONG SHOULD A VIGNETTE PLAY BE?

Because you're working with scenes on a theme, rather than the development of a single story, 30 minutes is an ideal length for the Vignette Play – it's short enough to keep an audience and long enough to give the group a substantial creation project. An audience will hang in and be interested in scene work, but after awhile there needs to be a developing story to hold them.

HOW MANY ACTORS ARE IN A VIGNETTE PLAY?

This is completely up to you! Flexible casting is at the heart of the Vignette Play. You can have each actor perform in only one scene (and so have a very large cast) or you can have actors perform in multiple scenes (for a smaller cast).

WHAT ARE THE STEPS TO WRITING A VIGNETTE PLAY?

This guide will offer a step-by-step process designed to help get your group efficiently and effectively to a final product:

- Establish and practice how to brainstorm in groups.
- Establish and practice how to brainstorm individually.
- Decide on a theme.
- Improv on the theme in a theatrical context.
- Start the formal scene-writing process.
- Decide on the shape of the play.

- Assemble the first draft.
- Record and organize.
- Move beyond the first draft.
- Choose a title.
- The final product.

The first thing to notice is that writing scenes does not occur immediately in this process. It's vital that students don't start writing scenes as their first step. While this may seem counter-productive (you are working on a play after all) it's very purposeful.

Following each step is especially important if you have students who feel insecure in their ability to write. Every class has one or two students who already have the natural instinct to write a play. But this is a group project and that means there are 20-30 students who don't have that instinct. These steps are going to encourage insecure students, providing them with a process that they'll be able to use in any writing situation.

Chapter Two: Brainstorming



Brainstorming: A technique of solving problems, amassing information, stimulating thinking, developing new ideas through unrestrained and spontaneous discussion. – dictionary.com

Brainstorming can be extremely effective for generating source material. It can also turn into a chaotic mess with participants yelling out their ideas while shooting down others, causing some to censor themselves and feel insecure about what they have to contribute.

Students have to work together, respect the ideas of others, and learn how to get their work on the page without self-judgment or self-censorship.

Therefore, the first step in this process is to practice brainstorming in groups. This is not about finding the theme for the play, it's about gaining confidence with a particular technique. Once students are comfortable with this aspect, then they're ready to move forward.

BRAINSTORMING EXERCISE

Purpose: To practice brainstorming.

- Break your class up into groups.
- Give each group chart paper, a marker, and an index card. A category (e.g. Current Events, Historical Events, Education, Teen Issues, Technology, Religion, Inventions, Medicine, Science, Culture, Sports) is written on the index card.
- Each group has a five minute time limit to write down (on the chart paper) anything and everything that comes to mind when they think of that category. This can include questions, thoughts, stories, emotions, words, images, senses, movies/books/music that explore the category.
- Each group shares what they have written.

Coaching Tips

Don't push students to 'find' themes, or come up with 'good' ideas. Most importantly, do not push students to think in terms of what they want to write about just yet. This is just an exercise.

Take small steps. Encourage them to write down everything they come up with. Aim for quantity. Give a prize, or extra marks for the group with the most amount of notes.

The point of the exercise is to practice the habit of putting everything and anything on the page, to always have more to work with than is needed. When it comes to brainstorming, quantity is better than quality. It's easier to re-write and revise than to build up from the bare minimum.

The time limit pushes students to write and record quickly, without overthinking or self-judgement. Self-judgement leads to writer's block.

Example

Category: The Environment

Chart Paper Notes:

- Extreme weather – tornado, hurricanes, tsunami, hail.
- Holes in the ozone layer – is that really happening?
- Melting ice caps, whole world ending up under water.
- Pollution? Smog – wearing masks. Asthma.
- Will we have to stay inside all the time one day?
- Air pollution, noise pollution, water pollution.
- Environment extremists – people who hate the environment people.
People who say there's nothing wrong with the environment.
- Is the weather different than it used to be?
- Is the environment worse than it used to be?
- Bottled water. Too much plastic!
- Garbage, where do we put it if we run out of places?
- Nature. Trees. Waterfalls. Flowers. Cutting rainforest?
- Oil spill.
- Going green – what's the greenhouse effect??
- Too many people hurt the environment.
- Solar panels. Windmills.
- The nuclear crisis in Japan – radioactive fallout in the wind.
- Toxic waste.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

The way to encourage students to brainstorm creatively is to avoid using the word 'creative.'

Brainstorming is a combination of contributing output and accepting input. Students who think their ideas are going to be ridiculed learn to stay quiet and contribute nothing. But brainstorming is such a valuable skill, one which will transcend beyond this particular exercise.

Emphasize that no thought is wrong, no thought is unusable, no thought should be shut down.

Emphasize the importance of not judging anything someone else says at this early stage. Every thought is good enough to go on the initial brainstorming page. At this stage there is no thought without potential.

It takes time to learn how to put words on a page without self-criticism. It takes time to learn how to refrain from automatically judging someone else's ideas. The ability to brainstorm as a group, and to be open to everyone's thoughts is crucial to this process.

Repeat the above exercise if you're unsure how well your students are going to work together, or how well they'll contribute to the process. Keep repeating the exercise until students feel comfortable contributing output and accepting input.



Chapter Three: The Theme

The choice of theme can be overwhelming. How is it possible to get 20-30 individuals to decide on one theme? How do you decide on one theme when there are so many to choose from? This can stall a project before it's begun.

Note: If your theme has been predetermined I still suggest following these steps. This project focuses on the process of writing. The more your students practice, the better they'll get at it.

TOPIC STREAMS

The first step is to limit the choices. Even if you want to allow the students to make all the decisions, there should be some structure in place. Limitless choices can create barriers to moving forward. As you'll see, structure does not mean fewer ideas on the page. It merely provides a focus for students. I suggest three topic streams to choose from:

- Curriculum
An event or subject that the students currently study.
- Issues
A social issue such as depression, a cultural issue such as racism.
- Current Events
Chosen from a current headline or story. Wikipedia has current events portal at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Current_events

GENERATE SOURCE MATERIAL

Once one of the three streams is chosen, brainstorm in groups. As with the earlier brainstorming exercise, avoid focusing on *we could write a play about this* or *we could write a scene about this*.

Brainstorming involves gathering and generating source material – the raw data. It is the well from which to draw the scenes. Generate source material, *then* discuss theatrical opportunities. Step by step.

Choose a stream: Curriculum, Issues, or Current Events.

- Divide the class into groups. Each group gets chart paper and a marker.

Teaching Resources

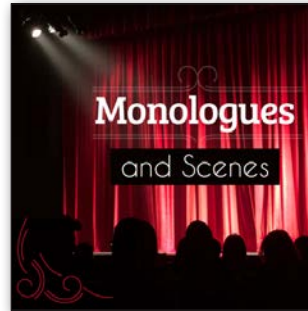
Quality resources to use in your drama classroom



The Drama Classroom Companion

The Drama Classroom Companion is filled with articles and exercises to build the skills needed for theatrical performance as well as real world skills like creative thinking, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication.

theatrefolk.com/companion

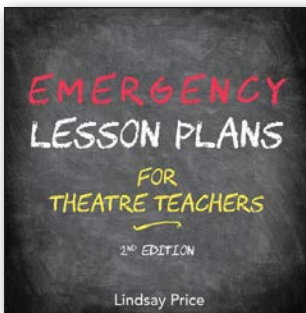


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All monologues and scenes come from published plays and include running-times, descriptions, character notes and staging suggestions.

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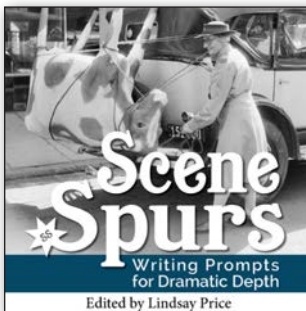
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The Student Director's Handbook

Help students take their show from first audition to opening night with *The Student Director's Handbook*. This easy-to-use ebook is full of guidelines, tips and templates designed to help students create a vision, circumvent problems and organize rehearsals on their way to a successful production.

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Scene Spurs is a collection of photo-based writing prompts developed by playwright Lindsay Price. The set includes 35 different Spurs along with an instruction guide to integrate them into your drama classroom.

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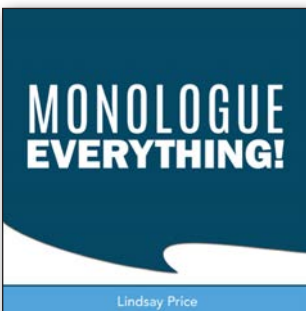


Write Your Own Vignette Play

Your students want to write and perform an original play. You want to include a playwriting unit in your program. But where to start? What if your students have never written a play before? What if you've never written before?

Write Your Own Vignette Play will answer all your questions and more

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