

The Lear Project Writing Exercises

Here you will find the weekly writing exercises for The Lear Project. We will be adding to this list every Tuesday during the project. Happy Writing!

Week 1

Set a timer for ten minutes and write a monologue from the point of view of a character about a “thing” in your story. The speaker can be a main character or a minor character or even a character we’ll never see again. The “thing” can be theme or plot, but it can also be a prop (that one fucking stapler) or another character (the sexy mailman) or anything else. Don’t worry about it making sense, just let your fingers wander for ten minutes as you explore the idea.

Do this two more times, each for ten minutes, switching up either the character or the thing they are talking about (but not both).

Week 2

One of the best things about theater is its ability to constantly stretch the boundaries of what is possible to show on stage: the Angel bursting through the ceiling in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, talking stones in Sarah Ruhl’s *Eurydice*, a character reciting a four-page list of every crime it is possible to commit in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Fucking A*. Plays are constantly challenging what is possible to do on a stage.

Spend 10 minutes coming up with a list of 10 things you think are impossible to do on stage. These can be things that are too big, too small, too dangerous, too boring, too just about anything you want.

Once you’ve created your list, spend 30 minutes writing a scene that includes at least three of the things from your list. It can be a scene that will go in your play, a scene with characters or themes from your play that doesn’t actually fit in, or a scene that has nothing to do with what you’re writing whatsoever.

Week 3

Make character bios for your 3 biggest characters (or the 3 you like the most). Try to answer some or all of the following questions:

Name:

Age:

Height:

Weight:

Birth date:

Birthplace:

Color hair:
Color eyes:
Scars or Handicaps (Physical, Mental, Emotional):
Other distinguishing traits (Smells, voice, skin, hair, etc.):
Educational background:
Work experience:
Military service:
Marital Status (Include reasons):
Best friend:
Men/women friends:
Enemies (Include why):
Parents (Who? Where? Alive? Relationship?):
Present problem:
Greatest fear:
How will problem get worse?
Strongest character traits:
Weakest character traits:
Sees self as:
Is seen by others as:
Sense of humor:
Basic nature:
Ambitions:
Philosophy of life (Include how it came to be):
Hobbies:
Preferred type of music, art, reading material:
Dialog tag (Idioms used, speech traits, e.g. "you know"):
Dress:
Favorite colors:
Pastimes:
Description of home (Physical and the "feel"):
Most important thing to know about this character:
One-line characterization:

Week 4

Marsha Norman is one of the greatest thinkers about play structure in the world and she has many brilliant ideas worth exploring (some of which are in the resource corner) but she has one particular exercise that is really helpful when you're about halfway through a play. All you have to do is fill in the blanks of this madlib:

This is a play about _____. It takes place _____. The main character wants _____ but _____. It starts when _____ and it ends when _____.

So, for example, if we were writing about the character of Hamlet in the play Hamlet, the mad lib might go like this: This is a play about a prince who is forced to seek revenge when his father is murdered by his uncle. It takes place at Elsinore castle, the court of the late King. The main

character wants to avenge his father's death but he must first be sure of his uncle's guilt. It starts when the ghost of the murdered king appears. It ends when the prince kills his uncle and dies in the process.

But we could also do a version that's theme based rather than character based: This is a play about minds and the ways they betray us. It takes place between the competing ideologies of Hamlet, the Ghost, Claudius, and Horatio. The main character wants to prevent people from

understanding his mind while gaining an understanding of theirs (and his own) but the more he tries to hide himself, the more obvious he becomes. It starts when Hamlet must decide who he wants to be and it ends when that decision kills him.

You could do one about each of the other characters in the play (Gertrude is a particularly fascinating person to do it with) and end up with totally different descriptions, each true and each useful.

Now it's your turn. Try writing 5 different versions of this madlib for your play. You can focus on different characters, different themes, plot, story (not the same as plot), or even on a prop or setting (imagine telling the story of Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* from the perspective of the Cherry Orchard.)

Week 5

One of the most important, and most frustrating, aspects of writing play is structure. Part of the frustration comes from misunderstanding. You may have heard of a few "common" structures: 3 Act Structure, 5 Act structure, the Hero's journey, or (worst of all) "Save the Cat." Yet VERY few plays actually fit those rigid structures (even Shakespeare regularly fudged his 5 acts to make things work) and forcing yourself into them can destroy a play.

In great plays, structure blooms from content. There's the Fever Dream structure of Georg Büchner's *Woycek*, the Jazz of early Suzan-Lori Parks plays, the thesis-antithesis ping-pong of August Wilson, or the puzzle boxes of Christopher Chen. Some plays find structure in their subject, such as the use of wrestling by Kristoffer Diaz in *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* or Paula Vogel's step-by-step instruction gone awry in *How I Learned To Drive*. Other plays latch onto the structure of Ancient stories to tell modern tales as Arthur Miller did with *Death of a Salesman* (*Oedipus Rex*) or Lucas Hnath did with *The Christians* (*Antigone*). Still others find inspiration in something entirely random: Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* is based on playground games while Connor McPherson's *The Weir* is structured around the sound that wind makes when it sweeps across the Irish countryside.

Think about what structure your play is based on. What structures does your subject matter suggest? What are the structures of the plays that have most influenced this play? What would be the worst possible structure for a play about your topic? (which is not a bad place to start in searching for the best) Are there structures you've always loved and what about them did you love? Are there structure that you've always hated and what about them did you hate?

Once you've explored these questions, find three pieces of non-writing art that you think have interesting or useful structures in relation to your play. These can be paintings, sculptures, songs, albums, dances, photographs, buildings, ceramics (John Donne famously described the best poems as "well-wrought urns"). If art isn't exciting to you, then look at the natural world: birds flocking, the branching of trees, the clustering of scales on a pinecone. Ask yourself why these structures speak to you. What do you want to capture about them in your play and how might that shape where your story goes next?

Week 6

Writing plays can sometimes feel like wrestling the infinite freedom of a blank page into a box, but it's important to remember that there is always a whole world outside your box that you can tap into for added zoom. Some plays like Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop* or David Ives' *Venus in Furs* do this explicitly by blowing up the world. Other plays, like Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* or Sarah DeLappe's *The Wolves*, manage to change everything while changing nothing. Either way, now is a good time to think about ways you can deepen your understanding of the world and the characters so you can build towards an ending that bursts with the fullest possible emotions.

Write a scene between your main character (or any character you want to explore) and a character who is not in your play. It can be someone close to them like a mother or a spouse, or someone totally random like a bank clerk or a scuba instructor. It can be someone the play mentions but never shows, or someone we never hear about at all. This can be a scene that you will put in your play, but chances are it isn't. Instead, it's a chance to challenge yourself to see the characters you have grown to know so deeply in a new light that may set off different facets for you to use.

Week 7

Plays are big. All those scenes and characters and feelings. It's so many goddamn words. With all that a play is whirling around in your head, it can be hard to keep track of what's most important. For this week, we're going to create a version of your play you can hold in your hand. After all, it's a lot easier to examine a scale model than a palace. There are two different exercises to help you achieve this examination. Do whichever one feels more your style. Or do both. And feel free to do them more than once. Each time you do it, it will reveal different things.

Option 1) Write a two minute "trailer" for your play. Think of it like a movie trailer, exciting bits from throughout the story pasted together to give a sense of what your story is about and make the whole world desperate to buy tickets. Feel free to write voiceover (bonus points if you do it in movie announcer voice) but don't rely too much on it. Try to identify which moments and scenes you would want someone to see in order to get excited about your story.

Option 2) Sit down with someone (either someone in your house or set up a call, don't break quarantine) and tell them the story of your play for ten minutes. Don't look at the script, just talk

from memory, and try to take the entire ten minutes (it's much harder than you think). When you're done, make some notes to yourself about what parts made sense as you were explaining it and what parts didn't. Which aspects were you excited to talk about and which were a slog getting through? Which parts did you totally forget about? If you want, you can ask the person you told what they found exciting as well, but you don't have to. This exercise is for you to know what it feels like to tell the story you've worked so hard to tell.

Week 8

Back in the olden days of Sit-Coms, every episode would end with the main character giving a speech about what they'd learned. This "button speech" usually started with an "I guess" and laid out the simple lesson of that particular episode: "I guess drugs really are bad after all" or "I guess the answer was inside me all along" or "I guess I shouldn't have murdered that nun." As television got more sophisticated, these speeches disappeared (*Seinfeld's* famous dictum, "no hugging, no learning") or became ironic (*Community* does this constantly.) But while audiences may not want everything packaged into a nice little, button speeches still have enormous power in the writing process because they force us to consider what we hope the audience gets. And who knows, you might end up with the iconic final speech of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, which is the button speech to end all button speeches.

Write your main character (or any character) a button speech. They can deliver it out to the world or to another character in the play or even to a character that isn't in the play. The situation need not make any sort of sense in the world of your play at all. What matters is that you force your character to grapple with what they've learned (or haven't learned) and what has changed for them over the course of the play.