

THIS GUIDE CONTAINS:

- 2 lesson plans plus related workshop suggestions
- Link to excerpt from *Homeland Security* by Stuart Flack
- A list of Suggested Reading and Additional Recommended Resources

TIME FRAME:

- 2-3 in-class sessions and
1 out-of-class work period

TARGET AGE:

- Grades 10-12

DISCIPLINE:

- LANGUAGE ARTS

A Study Guide from Chicago Humanities Festival 2009 SUMMER INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS

PLAYWRITING with *Stuart Flack*



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STUART FLACK is Executive Director of the Chicago Humanities Festival. During his twenty years as a playwright, he has written several plays including *Homeland Security*, *Sydney Bechet Killed a Man*, and *American Life and Casualty*. His honors include a Joseph Jefferson Award Nomination and a Los Angeles Dramalogue Award.

**FROM THE GET-GO . . .
embracing the limitations of
playwriting makes for well-
written plays.**

STUART FLACK emphasizes the benefits that come from writing within a structure. Flack asserts that the act of playwriting is the most confined of writing because a play is limited in time and space and the communication of information is almost solely through dialogue. Understanding how to best utilize these restrictions helps students achieve greater success with their plays. Flack also highlights the importance of teaching students the distinction between story and plot. *Plot* encompasses the events that take place in the writing, while *story* encompasses the events in the lives of the characters. An effective playwright is able to convey a complete and detailed story even if the plot leaves out significant sections of time.

We recommend reading [this excerpt](#) from Flack's play *Homeland Security* as an introduction to his work and to the following activities.

1. THE SIX-LINE SCENE

PURPOSE: This is a great introductory writing exercise because it is short and safe. Students can get a sense of what they like and dislike about playwriting without getting too far into a piece of writing that just isn't going to work. This activity also serves as an introduction to two main topics – the difference between plot and story and pacing – that are essential lessons to the activity that follows.

LESSON PLAN: The first lesson is that definitions are key. This activity will help to define the terms: plot and story. Plot is the action we get to see unfold; story is the entirety of the characters' experiences. This is an important difference for young playwrights to understand.

The second lesson is about pacing. This activity will reveal something very important: the mistake of giving away too much too soon. Some students, because of the exercise's limitations, will tell their audience everything in a way that is unnatural. Others will get across a detailed story without giving away too much in the plot. It is this distinction, this ability to explore ambiguity that is a central component to writing successful plays. This is also a significant difference from the traditional expository writing students are assigned in high school where ambiguity is frowned upon.

- Have students pair off into playwriting teams. (Groups of two tend to work best for playwriting since much of the dialogue happens between two people.)

- Assign those students the task of writing a play/scene that is complete but only includes six exchanges or statements. (There are no limitations on who can say what. One character may say all six lines while the other sits there silently, but the total number of statements must be six.)
- Have students rehearse their scenes and then perform them for the class. Depending on time, you may want to limit the number of students that perform.
- Take time after each scene and/or set of scenes to discuss what worked and didn't work in this assignment.

2. DID YOU BRING IT?

PURPOSE: This activity is designed to create natural dialogue that uses ambiguity to engage the audience. Students can play around with that ambiguity as well, considering how much of the situation and the characters within it they want to tell us up front and how much they leave to the audience to figure out.

LESSON PLAN:

- Have students pair up. If possible and successful, have students pair up with the same partner from the six-line scene activity.
- This time students are going to write a longer scene (three to five pages) that follows a different set of restrictions. The play must start with the line "Did you bring it?" and at no time in the play can either character say what "it" is.

- After students have written their plays, they should rehearse and perform them again.
- Workshop those pieces to highlight the essential skills related to the purpose of the activity. (See “Workshop Suggestions” in next column.)

TAKING IT FURTHER:

This activity can work well in literature classes and for other subject areas as well. The main goal of the assignment is to view characters as real people who interact in a world with social cues rather than unreal characters who recite facts. In a social studies class, for instance, this could work as a way to understand historical figures better as the students would have the opportunity to think about what strategies historical figures may have used to accomplish their goals rather than writing a litany of that person’s accomplishments. For example, students could pick two of the founding fathers present at the discussions that led to important historical documents. They could then create a realistic dialogue that explores the approaches each man would have taken to ensure that his ideas were addressed in that document. This can also be a great interpersonal communication activity as it requires students to think about the motivation for both sides. Students could even use conflicts in their own lives as the premise for the story.

WORKSHOP SUGGESTIONS

Both of these activities rely heavily on the workshop format, where students share their work with the class and then the class offers feedback to help the piece improve. If you do not use workshops or peer editing in your classroom, you may want to establish some ground rules before getting started to avoid confrontations. In general, this type of activity works well for workshops because the students have all had limited time to write the piece. The level of personal investment is lower, thus reducing the likelihood of disappointment.

To enhance the effectiveness of the workshop, teacher may want to give specific assignments to the audience in terms of what types of critiques they should make. In the first assignment, the teacher can ask the students to decide whether the six-line scene has told the story or showed the plot. In the second activity, the teacher may ask students to identify any moments where the writers gave away too much information instead of relying on ambiguity and context clues. Giving the audience specific instructions will help focus the discussions while also giving the students the language and tools necessary to do similar editing on their own pieces when they are writing without the help of their classmates.

SUMMER INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS (SIT)

Each year, the Chicago Humanities Festival offers the Summer Institute for Teachers (SIT). This three-day workshop is designed for educators interested in personal and professional growth with lectures, workshops, and discussions from presenters who work in professional fields related to the yearly topic. The 2009 SIT theme was Creative Writing: Innovative Approaches to Writing & Reading in the Classroom. Presenters included cin salach on POETRY, Lawrence Weschler on NARRATIVE NON-FICTION, Stuart Flack on PLAYWRIGHTING, Josh Elder on GRAPHIC NOVELS, Natalie Moore on JOURNALISM, and Bayo Ojikutu on FICTION.

This lesson plan and comprehensive bibliography were developed by SIT’s Master Teacher, Greg Wright, from Walter Payton College Preparatory High School, and CHF staff based on Mr. Flack’s presentation at the 2009 Summer Institute for Teachers.

ABOUT THE CHICAGO HUMANITIES FESTIVAL

The Chicago Humanities Festival (CHF) creates year-round opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds, and economic circumstances to explore, to enjoy, and to support the arts and humanities. We accomplish this by presenting programs throughout the year, culminating in two annual Festivals of the Humanities, one in the spring specifically for children and families and one in the fall for the general public. CHF’s mission of providing broad access to the humanities—at a low ticket price—depends in part on the generosity of its committed and enthusiastic supporters.
www.chicagohumanities.org

SUGGESTED READING

Albee, Edward, *Three Tall Women*.

Pinter, Harold, *The Homecoming*.

Mamet, David, *American Buffalo*.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Flack, Stuart, *American Life and Casualty*.

Available at http://davidlavery.net/Feigning/American_Life/American_Life_and_Casualty.html

Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. Boston: Shambala Publications, Inc., 1986, 2005.

Lamott, Annie. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995.

Lerman, Liz and John Borstel. *Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process: A method for getting useful feedback on anything you make, from dance to dessert*. Available at: <http://www.danceexchange.org/performance/criticalresponse.html>

McSweeney's, especially Issue #31 (March 2009) on Form.

Postman, Neil, "Future Schlock" from *Conscientious Objections: Stirring Up Trouble About Language, Technology and Education*. New York: First Vintage Books, 1992, pp. 162-174.

Prose, Francine. *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Teachers and Writers Collaborative:

www.twc.org

Teachers & Writers Collaborative (T&W) seeks to educate the imagination by offering innovative creative writing programs for students and teachers, and by providing a variety of publications and resources to support learning through the literary arts.