

Guide to form – Drama and Screenplays

If I can write in any form, which should I choose? This is the question we are most often asked. There is no ‘better’ or ‘worse’ form but the brief notes below may help you decide.

All the world’s a stage. **Drama** is for performing, so points tend to be explicit, spoken by characters who argue over ideas from opposite poles.

In 1000/1500 words drama is likely to be one scene or perhaps two or three short ones, and you would likely stick to a small cast of two or three characters.

Here, Caryl Churchill combines the personal and the political in an argument about Mrs Thatcher – between two sisters. (Note: overlapping speech is represented by /)

MARLENE First woman Prime Minister. Terrifico. Aces. Right on. / You must admit. Certainly gets my vote.
JOYCE What good’s first woman if it’s her? I suppose you would have liked Hitler if he was a woman. Ms Hitler. Got a lot done, Hitlerina. / Great adventures.
MARLENE Bosses still walking on the workers’ faces? Still Dadda’s little parrot? Haven’t you learned to think for yourself? I believe in the individual. Look at me.
JOYCE I am looking at you.

Here is the introduction to ‘Here There Are No People’ by Noah Robinson, who was a Junior Runner Up in the 2020 Orwell Youth Prize:

The speakers all are children. The lines can be shared out in any way between the characters. They may be played by any number of actors.

1

I don’t want to make anyone sad.
Why would I want to make you sad?
If I did want to make you sad, I would tell you the story of when we got on the boat.

2

We were having breakfast.
The bombs fell.
When will the war stop?

Noah tells us more about why he chose to write in the form of a play:

“Plays provide authenticity for unheard voices, drawing attention to often under-represented perspectives. We connect most deeply to human-driven stories and the immersion created from a shared experience with an audience can inspire social change.”

Lights. Camera. ACTION! Similarly to a playscript, a **screenplay** is written to be performed, with a focus on dialogue and action.

In 1000/1500 words, you're probably going to want to stick to just one or two scenes. You can set out a screenplay similarly to a script for stage, with the character's name, what they're saying and how they're saying it, as well as brief descriptions of the setting, and directions for action.

Unlike a script for theatre, a screenplay can also include quick 'cutting' between scenes, flashbacks, and some more extreme action (e.g. you could have a car chase in a screenplay, or a big scene on a busy street with lots of characters – which would be much more difficult to act out on a stage!)

1) Begin each scene with this information, in capitals:

INT/EXT – Interior/Exterior (Indoors or outdoors)

PLACE

DAY/NIGHT

2) Give a few lines briefly describing the setting, if it's a new setting, and if it's necessary. These can be in short sentences/don't need to go into too much descriptive detail. Keep it clear and simple.

3) If necessary, describe any movement/the Point of View (POV) we are seeing the action from.

4) When characters are introduced, include a brief description.

5) Dialogue underneath character's name (in capitals). Info about how they're speaking in brackets.

6) If you're moving to a new scene, end your scene with 'CUT TO'. If you're moving to a new part of the same scene, you can simply say 'PANS TO'. End your script with 'CUT TO BLACK/FADE TO BLACK'.

7) You can split description/action with dashes/ellipsis to give a sense of the pace/build suspense.

You can find lots of examples of scripts, for TV and for film, in the BBC Writersroom Script Library: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/scripts>.

And here's an example from Orwell Youth Prize 2021 winner, Anya Edgerton's screenplay 'A Small Thing':

CLARA

*No... it's not that.. just... we
always have to study the work of
very posh and very dead white men
and metaphors I can't understand...
It just doesn't feel...
(motions as she struggles
to find the word)
relevant.*

That hangs in the air for a beat. Flickers of agreement in the eyes around the room.