

PLAYWRITING for KIDS
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GLOSSARY:

Protagonist: The main character. The protagonist is usually the hero, but not always. Simba (Lion King), Ariel (Little Mermaid), Rudy (Rudy), etc. It is the person who wants something so badly he or she will do anything to get it.

Antagonist: The person who stands in your character's way (Scar, the Wicked Witch of the West, Ursula). But this person DOES NOT have to be a villain. In a play it may be someone with personal ties to your protagonist, who doesn't intend to be mean (Ariel's father, King Neptune). Not every play has an antagonist. But every play does have something the protagonist has to fight against.

The "I Want:" That thing the protagonist wants so badly he'll die to get it if need be. Simba wants to be like his father. Ariel wants to live "where the people go," Rudy wants to play for Notre Dame.

The Conflict: The reason your main character can't get what he wants. If your character can get what he wants then there is no play. This reason can be a person (Scar), a thing (the "storm" in "Perfect Storm), something inside (Simba's guilt –believing that he killed his father), something outside the character's control (Rudy is too short; Rudy doesn't have the grades to get into Notre Dame; Rudy doesn't play well enough to be on the team, etc.) Or, it can be any combination of all of these. You, the playwright, are to place a big obstacle in your character's way, and then have him overcome it.

The Climax: The surprising moment in the play that your character overcomes his obstacle or obstacles in a unique way. Do not make this ordinary. Surprise us. Have your character learn something in the process. Then make him change in some way. It can be a small way, but an important way.

In other words, your character realizes that he didn't want what he thought he wanted. Or, your character learns that the something he wanted is not as good as he thought it was. Or that if you have to give up something important to get this thing, it is not worth it.

For instance:

*After the Wizard fails to get her back home Dorothy realizes she had the power to get back to Kansas all along. This character didn't get what she wanted in the way she wanted it--she got something even better: the ability to do it herself.

*Rudy does not get to play on the first string Notre Dame team. But his teammates are so impressed by his determination, that they give him a chance to score the winning touchdown in the final game of the season in front of his father. Now, what can be more important than that? It turns out that those final six seconds are all he needed. Rudy didn't get what he wanted in the way he thought, but what he got was even better because he earned it through hard work and determination. In the process he grows as a person.

*Ariel gets what she wanted, to walk on land, but it nearly costs her her voice and the prince. While she gets what she wants, she realizes it isn't worth giving up yourself in the process. So this character gets what she wants but learns something too.

HOW DO YOU WRITE YOUR PLAY?

1. Choose a character, and an idea you want to express.

I'll make up a new play. It will be five pages long, in other words, five minutes. In this case, my character is a girl named Sally. Sally has a limp which has turned into a handicap for her. The idea I want to express is that "good things often come in ways you don't expect."

2. What does your character want?

Sally wants a dog.

3. What does your character REALLY want? I mean, what's underneath her want?

She wants to be loved. Why? Her mother is cold to her, and Sally fears she doesn't love her. As a result she has developed an active imagination from being alone a lot.

4. What's standing in her way?

Her mother doesn't want a dog. In fact, Sally has decided her mother doesn't want a child with a limp, either.

5. Figure out the type of play this is going to be: comedy, fantasy, drama, historical, experimental etc.

I'm going to make mine a fantasy drama.

6. Plot the action.

Find an interesting place to start. A middle of a fight will do. Don't start at the beginning, start at the middle of something, in this case an ongoing argument between Sally and her mother about why she can't have a pet.

I'm going to start this story in a pet shop, between a disagreement between Sally and her mother. I want to show that something else is going on here besides Sally wanting a dog and her mother saying "no."

7. Figure out what your climax is going to be.

When Sally's mother reveals her true reasons for not wanting a dog.

8. Figure out how to keep Sally from getting what she wants while giving her something better instead. (or give her what she wants, but have her realize that she's gotten something more important)

I'm going to give Sally her dog, but I'm going to make her realize that it's her mother's love which she really wanted.

9. Okay, now outline.

1. Sally, in a pet shop, falls for a dog named Rags. The pet store owner explains that every dog has one need, and that is to love. If dog and master are meant to be together nothing can keep them apart. Mom refuses to buy Sally the dog. After all, SALLY IS LAME. Sally says goodbye to Rags.

2. Sally in a dream sequence with Rags where she has no limp, and no crutches. Suddenly the dream changes to a nightmare. She realizes that her mother will never give in, and what's more she will always think of her as lame. Sally runs away, leaving a note. Before she gets very far she falls, hurting herself--the crutch falls out of her grasp.

3. Mother finds the note. She had no idea Sally felt unloved. Mother tears apart daughter's room looking for clues as to where Sally could have gone. She finds drawings of dogs everywhere. They come alive, and Mother relives her fear of dogs. They are attacking her...she runs out.. heading toward the pet shop.

4. Mother, looking for Sally but not seeing her, is talking as if Sally is right there. She is speaking in a far away voice: "When you were a little baby you used to love to sleep outside and many times I left you out in your carriage while I made dinner..." (we see Sally while mother does not) "One evening a large dog escaped from a nearby kennel. He was standing in our yard and his face was in your carriage! I ran out, afraid that if I was too late... The dog was trying to drag you away. I managed to tear you away.... Of course they tried to mend the scar. They went to work on your leg immediately. It was my fault," Mother cries, suddenly—"My fault!—I left you out there simply because you loved the sound of the outside!" As mom sobs Sally rises to comfort her. Suddenly, she realizes she is standing. She freezes in fear. "Just give it a try," her mother whispers, seeing her. Sally takes a step. Then another...she falls into her mother's arms, sobbing. "I thought of your limp as a punishment for my guilt," Mother explains. "I wasn't thinking of you at all., what you needed from me..." Sally realizes her mom has loved her more than she ever knew. Sally tells her mother she doesn't have to get a dog.

5. A barking is heard in the distance. The pet shop owner enters with Rags. Since they left the pet store Rags has been huddled in a corner, the Pet Store owner explains. "Okay, here's the thing," he admits. "Every dog has its owner, and Rags has figured Sally is it." "Okay," says mom. "We'll give it a try."

THINGS TO REMEMBER:

Show don't tell

Don't tell us that your character is unhappy: "Oh, I'm so unhappy. I wish I could have that new puppy, but my mother hate dogs."

Instead, put your character into the situation. If she wants a dog, then have the dog lick her face. Have her laugh with delight. Have her summon up her courage to ask her mother to buy him as a pet.

Example.

Scene 1

There is a sound of barking in the distance.

Sally and her mom are in pet store.

(Sally sits on the floor. She plays with Rags, a puppy.)

PET STORE OWNER (to Sally): That's right, Miss. I believe every dog has it's master, and every master has but one true dog.

SALLY: Do you really think so?

MOTHER: Don't be ridiculous. (Rags moves toward her, and she jumps back in fright)

PET STORE OWNER: But Mrs. Cummings. He's only a puppy. See? Rags won't hurt you. He only wants to---

MOTHER: (as Rags tries to play with her leg) Get that dirty thing away from me!

SALLY: (To pet store owner). But it's my birthday tomorrow, and all I ever wished for is a —

MOTHER: (pulling Sally up) Sally, we can't.

SALLY: (disappointed) I was only playing. He's only a puppy.

MOTHER: Do you expect me to take care of a dog and a lame child too?

SALLY: (pause) No.

PET STORE OWNER: The child doesn't t look lame to me.

(Sally opens hers coat, revealing a scar running from thigh to knee. Pet Store Owner smiles.)

PET STORE OWNER: That's almost nothing.

MOTHER: (Handing crutches to Sally) Really, Sally. A dog.

PET OWNER: I'm sorry, honey.

SALLY: (looking at Rags) You're just the cutest--never mind.

Be free. Use your imagination. This is YOUR Play.

Scene 2

Sally is alone in her room. The walls are covered with drawings of dogs. She is drawing furiously. She holds up her drawing. It is of Rags. Music rises. ("How much is that Doggy in the window?")

Rags has turned into a prince. Sally is dressed in a beautiful, flowing gown. Soft music rises; they dance. Suddenly, the music turns dark. The lights lower, and a clash of thunder is heard. A sound rises like a pack of wild dogs. A woman screams. Sally wants to stay with Rags, but she can't and she runs toward the screams.

And so on.

It's okay to make your play a fantasy, comedy, dark drama, or anything you like as long as you are consistent. If you decide somewhere in the middle, "hey, it's a comedy now," go back and make it funny from the start.

DIALOGUE

When writing dialogue (the things the characters say to each other) here's a tip. Try to have them say the OPPOSITE of what they want to say.

For example. Sally's mother wants to say: "Sally, I want to get you everything you want, but it's just too much for me."

What comes out instead is: Do you expect me to take care of a dog and a lame child too?

SCENES

Scenes are about one character trying to express something, or to get something from another character. What Sally wants in the opening scene is a dog. What she gets instead is a reminder that she is handicapped.

A scene doesn't have to use words. Scene two is a dance sequence. What happens in this scene? Sally expresses her desire for love, to be normal, to be able to walk without crutches.

SURPRISES

Don't give us the whole story all at once. Sometimes you can save bits and pieces as surprises for the audience, and for revelations about the characters. For instance, we don't know that Sally is lame in the beginning, that comes as a surprise when her mother hands her the crutches.

Sally thinks her mother is mean, until the mother reveals the true reason during the climax of the story.

EXPOSITION

Only give the audience what they absolutely have to know. What do we need to know in the Sally story? That Sally wants a dog, and mother doesn't. That's it. In some cases we need to go deeper than this, but first ask yourself: Is this information vital to telling the story?

CLIMAX

Have your character give up something to gain something. Sally gives up her dog, but she gains understanding into her mother's feelings.

FINDING A TITLE

After you've gotten the general idea of your story (waiting until after you've written it is not a bad idea) you need to give it a title. There are obvious choices that point to the plot of the story:

Using the Sally story for example, there's: "The Dog." (don't like this). There's "From Rags To Riches," (too cliché); "Every Dog Has It's Owner," (too obvious), or "The Scar." But none of these titles are what this play is really about.

It helps to go back to the theme, in this case: "Good things sometimes come in ways you least expect them." What this story is really about is not a girl and a dog, but a girl and her mother. As this is a simple story about this girl wishing for a dog, but really wishing for the love of her mother, I'm going to call it "A Simple Wish."

Usually simple is best. Give it thought. Sometimes a title is obvious; sometimes it takes a little work.