

Write a Play

Begin this project by reading "Miss Louisa and the Outlaws"
on pages 324-335 of *Explorations*.

These books will help you as you do this project:

Putting on a Play: A Guide to Writing and Producing Neighborhood Drama
by Susan and Stephen Judy (Scribner, 1982).

The Theater Student: You Can Write a Play by Milton E. Polsky (Rosen Group,
1983).

The Young Writer's Handbook by Susan and Stephen Tchudi (MacMillan, 1984).

In order to write a play, you will need:

Paper

Pens or Pencils

CREDITS

Senior Consultant: Sally M. Reis

Consultant: Plato Karafelis

Design and production: LeGwin Associates

Illustration: Simon Galkin

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MISS LOUISA and the OUTLAWS

by Frances B. Watts

Each year, for more than thirty years, Miss Louisa has taught her students the meaning of courage. Even so, today's lesson will stand out from all the others. . . .

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Narrator Cynthia Harwood
Miss Louisa, *schoolteacher* . . . Stephanie Pierce
Caroline, *pupil* Elizabeth Lennon
William, *pupil* Eric Hinton
Annabelle, *pupil* Tina Rodriguez
Clara, *pupil* Christine Daniels
Regina, *pupil* Judy Sakowitz
Benny, *outlaw* Clifton Phillips
Dead-Eye Dan, *outlaw* James Haggerty
Sheriff Maurice Simpson
Ed, *his deputy* Samuel Patrick

Presented by the pupils of the Madison School



Narrator: Many years ago, around the turn of the century, a history lesson is beginning in a little one-room schoolhouse in the West. The teacher is Miss Louisa, and her students, Caroline, William, Annabelle, Clara, and Regina, are sitting at attention with their hands folded.

Miss Louisa: For our history lesson this afternoon, you all were to learn the first three stanzas of "Paul Revere's Ride." Caroline, would you come to the front of the room and recite, please?

Caroline: Uh — uh — "Listen, my" — uh — "children, and you shall hear." Uh — uh —

Miss Louisa (Sternly): I see that you haven't studied your lesson, Caroline. You will stay after school and learn the lines before you leave this afternoon. Do you understand?

Caroline (Mumbling): Yes.

Miss Louisa: Remember your manners! Yes *what*, Caroline?

Caroline (Speaking with respect): Yes, *Miss Louisa*.

Miss Louisa: William, let's see how well you have learned the stanzas.

William: Uh — uh, "Listen, my children, and you shall hear." Uh — uh. "Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere." Uh — uh —

Miss Louisa: Another shirker! William, you will join Caroline after school. Do you understand?

William (Mumbling): Yes.

Miss Louisa: Yes, *what*, William?

William (With respect): Yes, *Miss Louisa*.

Miss Louisa (Sighing): Students, I realize that this poem may seem a bit dull and uninteresting, but I'm asking you to memorize it in hopes that you will recognize the courage and strength some of our ancestors possessed when they founded our great country. Do you have any idea what courage is?

Pupils (After a moment's hesitation): No, Miss Louisa.

Miss Louisa: Well, courage is behaving bravely when you are most afraid. All of us, at some time, have been afraid. Those who discipline themselves and control fear in times of stress are exhibiting courage. Is that clear?

Pupils: Yes, Miss Louisa.

Miss Louisa: Annabelle, do you think that you can recite the lines for us?

Annabelle: Yes, Miss Louisa. (*Reciting*):

"Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere."

(*As Annabelle recites the poem, Benny and Dead-Eye Dan, two outlaws, enter the schoolroom with drawn guns.*)

Benny: Stay where you are!

Caroline (Fearfully): Outlaws! It's Benny the Kid and Dead-Eye Dan — the ones who robbed Dodge City Bank last week!





William: It is! It is! Their pictures are up in the post office. Wanted, dead or alive! A hundred dollars reward! (Pupils *stream with terror and run to the back of the room.* Miss Louisa *raps on her desk with a ruler for attention.*)

Miss Louisa (Sternly): Back to your seats, everyone! How often have I told you never to leave your seats without permission? Sit down at once!

Dan: Nobody's going to get hurt, kiddies, as long as you set there quiet.

Miss Louisa (With great dignity): Watch your grammar in front of my pupils, sir. The proper expression is *sit there quietly* — not *set there quiet*.

Dan (Baffled): Huh? Oh. As long as you *sit there quietly*.
Benny: Just in case somebody tipped off the sheriff that we're in town, my pal Dan and me are going to hide out here till the two-thirty freight train comes through. Then we'll make our getaway. So don't anybody get any bright ideas, like yelling out the window or running for help. See?

Dan: Let's take a load off our feet. We can sit at those two empty desks. May as well be comfortable till train time.

Miss Louisa (Firmly): Just a moment, Daniel! I believe that is your name. You and Benjamin will kindly wipe your feet on the mat in the doorway before you sit down.

Benny (In confusion): Say, what is this? Dan and me got guns. We don't have to take orders from you.

Miss Louisa: It's *Dan and I have guns*, sir. As long as you and Benjamin take refuge here, I shall insist that you obey the laws and rules of our schoolhouse. Kindly wipe your feet, gentlemen!

Dan (Grudgingly): All right. All right. We'll wipe our feet.

Miss Louisa: Mind your manners, sir. When I speak to you, you are to answer, "Yes, Miss Louisa." Do you understand?

Benny and Dan (Meekly): Yes, Miss Louisa.

Miss Louisa: All right, you may sit down now.

Benny (Aside, puzzled): I don't know why we let this school-teacher lead us around by the nose, Dan. By all rights, we ought to tie her up in the closet.

Miss Louisa (Brisk and efficient): Well, students, we shall continue our history lesson tomorrow. It is now time for music. Let's have a song — a jolly one. How about "Old MacDonald Had a Farm"?

Regina: We can't sing, Miss Louisa. We — we're too scared!

Miss Louisa: Afraid, Regina? Of what is there to be afraid? As far as we are concerned, we simply have two extra pupils in our room. We will follow our usual schedule.

(Miss Louisa *takes her pitch pipe from her pocket and sounds the key.* Pupils *begin to sing.* Miss Louisa *suddenly raps on her desk with the ruler, interrupting the song, and speaks sternly to Benny and Dan.*)

Miss Louisa: Benjamin and Daniel, why aren't you singing?
Dan (Bewildered): Huh? Why should we sing?

Rara (Earnestly): Because, when we have music in this school, everybody sings.

Annabelle: That means *everybody*. It's a school rule.

Miss Louisa: Clara and Annabelle, this is not your affair. (*Firmly*): When we start to sing again, you will sing. Do you understand?

Benny (Mumbling): Yes.

Miss Louisa: Yes *what*, Benjamin?

Benny: Yes, Miss Louisa.

(*Miss Louisa blows on her pitch pipe again and waves her arms as she leads the song. The pupils' spirits rise as they sing. The faces of Benny and Dan are very serious as they sing along with Pupils. When the song ends, Miss Louisa goes to the window and gazes out with a worried frown. Benny and Dan jump up and draw their guns.*)

Benny: Stay away from that window, ma'am. We're not giving you the chance to signal for help.

Dan: You may be a schoolteacher, but you can't outsmart us. Nobody has ever outsmarted Benny the Kid and Dead-Eye Dan.

Miss Louisa (Speaking matter-of-factly): It looks a bit like rain. William, will you and Caroline please go out and bring in the flag?

Benny: Do you think we're stupid? Why, the minute those kids leave this room they'll run for the sheriff.

William (Nervously): Don't insist that we go, Miss Louisa! It really doesn't look like rain.

Miss Louisa: There are cumulus clouds forming in the west. A shower could begin at any moment. It is a rule of our school that we never allow the American flag to become wet. One of you may accompany the students — but our flag must not be rained upon! Do you hear?

Benny: Oh, all right then.

Miss Louisa (Sternly): What did you say?

Benny (Meekly): Yes, Miss Louisa.

(*Benny heads toward the door, motioning to William and Caroline to go ahead of him. They go out the door while Dan keeps his gun drawn. After a moment, Benny, William, and Caroline return. They wipe their feet carefully, and William hands the flag to Miss Louisa, who folds it and lays it on her desk.*)

Miss Louisa: Now, students, we will have a spelling bee. Regina and Clara may be captains. You may start choosing teams, girls.

Regina: I choose Caroline for my team.

Clara: I choose William.

Regina: I choose Daniel.

Clara: I choose Benjamin.

Benny: Say, what is this? What's going on?

Dan (With enthusiasm): A spelling bee, pal. Ain't you never been in a spelling bee before?

Miss Louisa: *Haven't you ever, Daniel. Watch that grammar!*
Dan: Haven't you ever been in a spelling bee before?
Benny: No, and I'm not going to now. Besides, it'll be train time soon. We have to stay on the alert.

Miss Louisa (*Pauses. Then sympathetically*): Very well, Benjamin. I will excuse you from participating in the spelling bee. Naturally, it would be most embarrassing for you to be spelled down by a group of young children.

Benny (*Blustering*): Who's scared of being spelled down? Look, maybe I haven't had much schooling, but I'm not so dumb that a bunch of little kids can lick me at spelling.

Miss Louisa: I admire your spirit, Benjamin. You won't mind joining Clara's team then.

Benny (*Sighing*): Oh, all right.

Miss Louisa (*Severely*): What's that, Benjamin?

Benny: Yes, Miss Louisa.

Miss Louisa: Clara, please spell *doctor*.

Clara: *d-o-c-t-o-r*

Miss Louisa: Correct. Now, Regina, spell *lawyer*.

Regina: *l-a-w-y-e-r*

Miss Louisa: Good. Now, Benjamin, I would like you to spell the word *thief*.

Benny: Uh — uh. Lemme see. *t — h t-h-e-i-f*

Miss Louisa: That is wrong, Benjamin. The correct spelling is *t-h-i-e-f*. You may take your seat.

William (*Aside*): Gee whiz! He *is* a thief, and he can't even spell it!

Benny (*Sulkily*): Aw, so what if I'm not a good speller. I still make a good living.

Dan (*Suddenly*): What's that sound? Yeow! There goes the two-thirty freight train!

Benny (*Angrily*): I told you it was time to get out of here! But you had to let that schoolteacher talk us into a spelling bee!

(*Suddenly, Sheriff and Ed, his deputy, enter with their guns drawn. They catch Benny and Dan off guard.*)

Sheriff: Hands up!

Ed: You're covered.

(*Benny and Dan raise their hands as Ed takes their guns. Pupils cheer as Sheriff steers Benny and Dan toward the door.*)

Caroline: Sheriff, how did you know the outlaws were here?
Sheriff: I didn't know. I gathered that something was wrong, though, when I happened to look out of my office window and saw that the school flagpole was bare.

Ed: Why, you know as well as I do that, unless it's raining, Miss Louisa never lowers the flag until sundown. It's a rule of the school. Remember, Miss Louisa was *our* teacher too.
Miss Louisa: Sheriff, I was hoping you or Ed would notice that the flag was down and would remember that rule. Apparently my pupils remember *some* things that I teach them.

Annabelle (*Laughing*): Miss Louisa was just like Paul Revere's friend. She used a signal to tell about an enemy!

Miss Louisa: That's right, Annabelle. If Benjamin and Daniel were the slightest bit educated as to the ways of the weather, they would have known that cumulus clouds in the west rarely mean immediate rain.

Benny: I had a hunch that we should have tied that teacher up in the closet the minute we came in!

Dan: Could *you* have tied her up?

Benny: No, I guess I couldn't have at that. There's something about Miss Louisa. Well, you just can't imagine tying her up in a closet. (*Pauses*) She don't scare easy, and before you know it, you're half-scared of *her*.

Miss Louisa: The proper grammar, Benjamin, is *She doesn't scare easily*.

(Pupils run noisily out the door — all except William and Caroline. Miss Louisa sits limply down at her desk. She holds her head in her hands. After a moment she looks up and sees William and Caroline.)

Miss Louisa: Well, students, why are you still here?

Caroline: You asked us to stay and learn the first three stanzas of "Paul Revere's Ride," Miss Louisa.

Miss Louisa: Oh, so I did. Well, I will excuse you just this once. You see, I'm feeling a bit shaky.

William (Thoughtfully): Miss Louisa, you were afraid when the outlaws were here, weren't you?

Miss Louisa: Oh, yes. Very much afraid. I did everything in my power to delay them so that they might miss the train and be captured. Yet, I longed for them to leave before they decided to use those wicked guns on some of us.

Caroline: Well, you didn't act scared — not one bit!

William (Stoutly): Naturally, she didn't! She behaved bravely when she was most afraid. That's courage. Remember?

Miss Louisa: Perhaps I taught something today after all. Before you leave, please take the flag and hoist it again. There are several hours yet until sundown. We must abide by the rules of the school, you know.

William (With admiration): Yes, Miss Louisa.

Caroline: Yes, indeed. Good-by, Miss Louisa.

Author

Frances B. Watts was a substitute teacher for many years and was always interested in drama and the performing arts. Before her death in 1983, Mrs. Watts had published over twenty-five short plays. She also collaborated with her husband on a number of musical comedies, several of which they saw performed on the stage.



Benny: Yes, Miss Louisa.

Sheriff: Well, we'll take these scoundrels down to jail where they belong. You'll receive the hundred dollars reward in a few days, Miss Louisa.

Miss Louisa: Thank you. I believe it will be just enough money to take the children on an outing to the Dodge City Music Festival. (Pupils cheer.)

Ed: Come on, you two. It's jail for you.

Miss Louisa: Now, children, I believe that I will dismiss you for the rest of the afternoon.

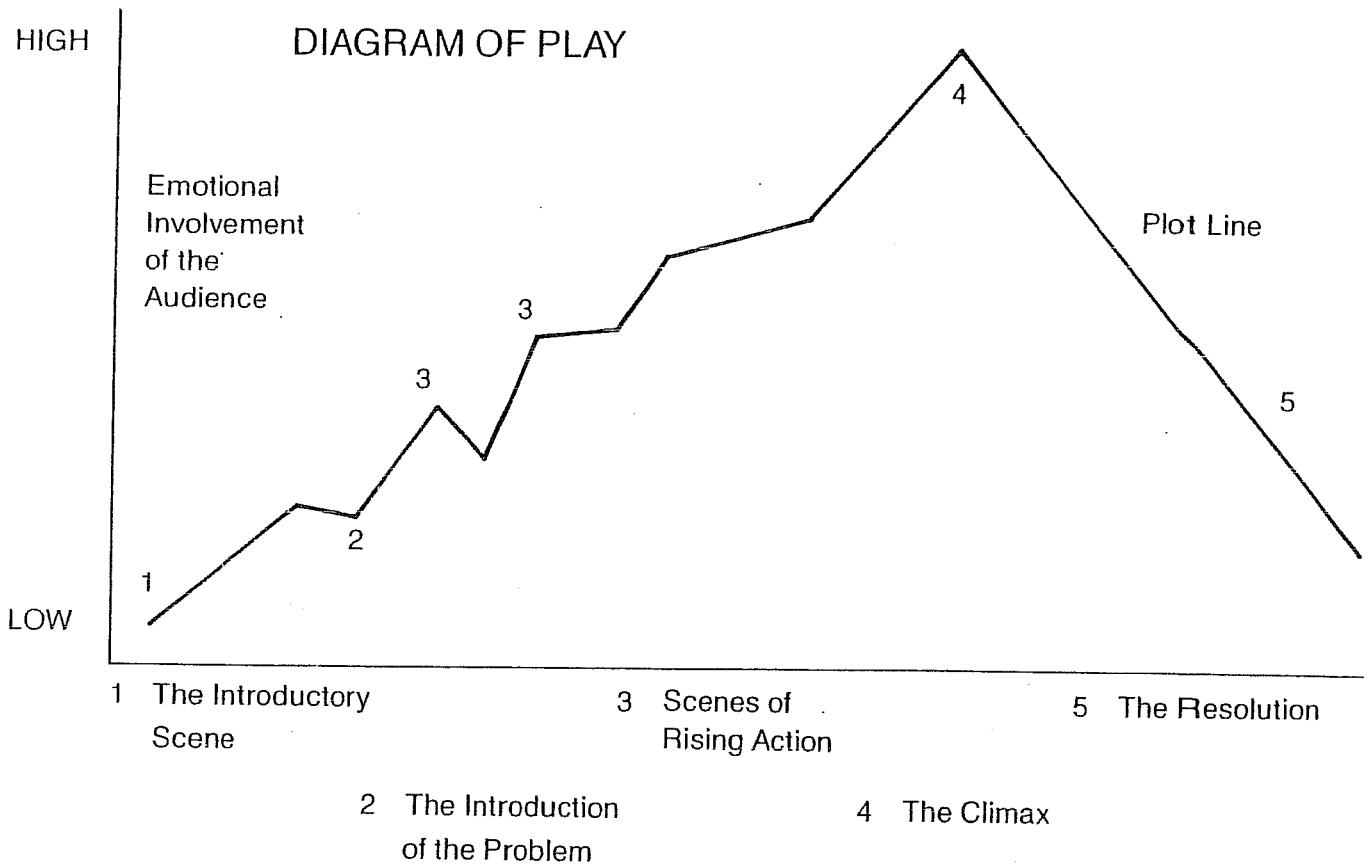
Pupils: Hooray! Hooray for Miss Louisa!

Write a Play

Frances B. Watts, the author of "Miss Louisa and the Outlaws," created interesting characters and exciting events. She could have used them to write a story, but she chose to write a play.

Have you ever written a play? Did you know that there are guidelines that a playwright, such as Frances B. Watts, uses in writing a play? You can use these same guidelines to become a playwright yourself.

Here is a diagram that shows how the action of a play rises and falls. Study this diagram for a few minutes to become familiar with it and with the labels. Refer to the parts of the diagram as you read the rest of the project.



You can see that the audience becomes more involved with the story as the plot line moves higher. The audience is most involved during the climax.

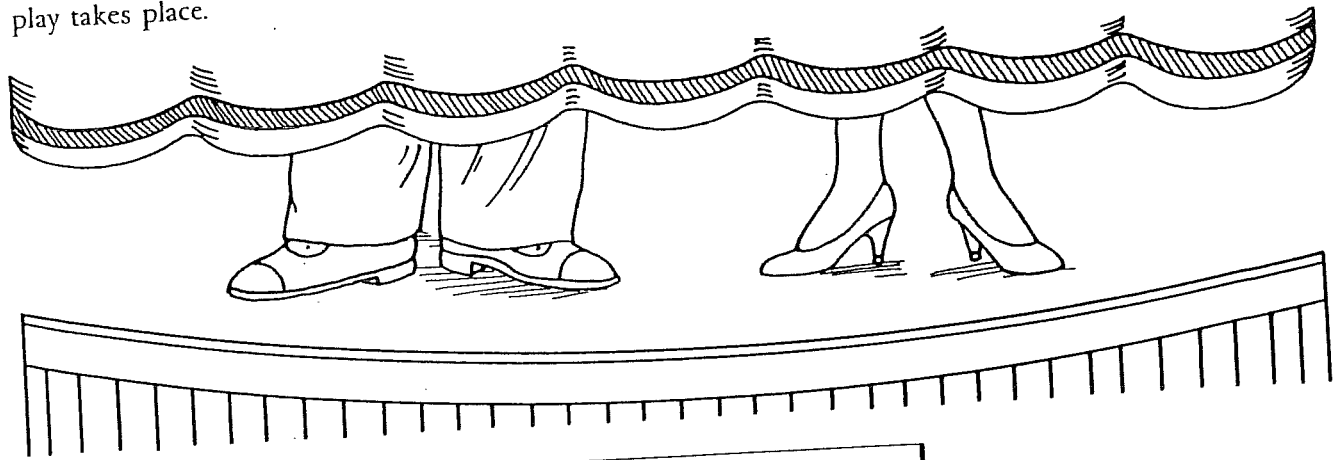
Understanding the Five Parts of a Play

A complete play should contain at least five parts. The scene or scenes that make up each part don't have to be long, but each scene must serve a purpose.

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Part 1: The Introductory Scene

The introductory scene does just what its name indicates — it introduces the play. In the introductory scene, the audience or reader meets the characters and learns something about where and when the play takes place.



EXAMPLE: In the play “Miss Louisa and the Outlaws,” the introductory scene takes place on page 326 and the top of page 327. On those pages, you learn the following facts:

WHERE the play takes place — in a school
WHO some of the characters are — Miss Louisa and several students

WHEN the play takes place — “Many years ago, around the turn of the century,” according to the narrator.

In writing your own play, you might want to use a narrator to explain details to the audience.

Keep in mind that interesting characters and settings will make your play more enjoyable to an audience. You may choose a setting and characters that are familiar to you. If you choose an unfamiliar setting and characters, you will want to do some background reading or research.

Part 2: The Introduction of the Problem

Every play contains a problem situation that the main character must face. In the scene that introduces the problem, the problem situation is presented to the audience. The rest of the play will focus on attempts to solve the problem and on what eventually happens.

EXAMPLE: Can you guess where the problem is introduced in “Miss Louisa and the Outlaws?” That’s right. The problem is introduced on page 327 when two more characters, the outlaws, Benny and Dead-Eye Dan, enter the school. Miss Louisa and the students will spend the rest of the play trying to outwit the outlaws.

You can introduce any problem in your play. It can be something personal, like the problem of dealing with big brothers, or something more general, like the problems of a town that is growing rapidly.

Remember that your main character will have to deal with whatever problem you choose.

Here are some questions that may help you create a good problem for your play:

- Will this problem be interesting to the type of audience my play will have?
- Is this problem difficult enough to keep the audience wondering how it will be solved or whether it will be solved?
- Will the main character be able to find a clever and interesting solution to this problem?

Just as you could choose either familiar or unfamiliar settings and characters, you can choose a problem that is familiar to you or a problem with which you have not had experience. If you choose a topic that is new to you, you can do background reading and research to get information about it.

Part 3: Scenes of Rising Action

Each scene of rising action is an attempt to solve the main problem of the play. Some scenes of rising action may fail to solve the problem or may even make it worse! Other scenes of rising action may solve part, but not all, of the problem.

EXAMPLE: In “Miss Louisa and the Outlaws,” part of the problem is solved in the scene on page 331, when Miss Louisa sends Benny, William, and Caroline out to lower the flag. Another scene of rising action occurs during the spelling bee. Miss Louisa uses the spelling bee to stall Benny and Dead-Eye Dan until they miss the train and the sheriff can arrive.

A play may contain one scene of rising action or several. The scenes may be long or short, but each one is an attempt to solve the problem.

Scenes of rising action should reflect your main character. If he or she is clever, like Miss Louisa, then each scene of rising action will probably be a strong step toward solving the problem. If your main character is weak or not very clever, your scenes of rising action may fail to solve the problem. In the end, however, the main character usually wins.

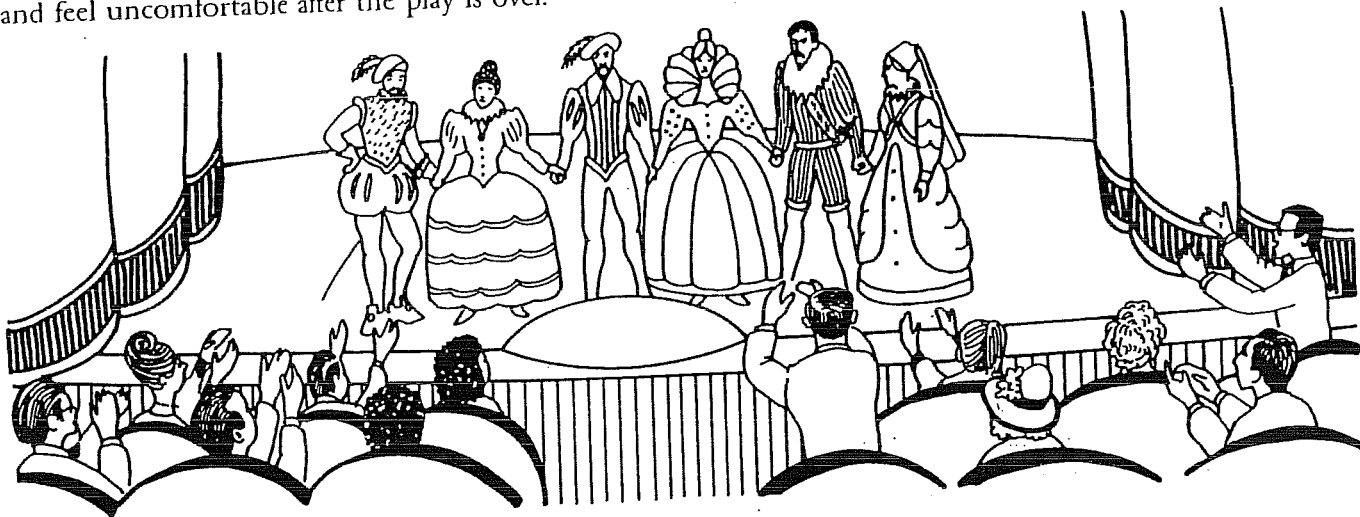
Part 4: The Climax

The climax is the most exciting part of the play. If your play has “good guys” and “bad guys,” they will have a showdown at the climax of the play. At this time, the audience finds out whether the main character will succeed in solving the problem. Most of the time, the main character wins.

EXAMPLE: In “Miss Louisa and the Outlaws,” the climax occurs at the bottom of page 332 and the top of page 333 when Benny and Dead-Eye hear the train whistle and realize that Miss Louisa has tricked them. Before they can do anything to her, the Sheriff enters and captures the two outlaws.

The author meant this scene to be the most exciting in the play. Did you think it was?

During the climax, someone has to win and someone has to lose. Playwrights often have the main character win, or succeed in solving the problem, so that the audience will feel good about the play and satisfied with the outcome. Sometimes a playwright prefers to have the bad guys win or to have the main character fail. A playwright who does so must understand that the audience may be disturbed and feel uncomfortable after the play is over.



Part 5: The Resolution

After the climax, the main action of the play is over. You may still have a few loose ends to tie up, however, and this is the purpose of the resolution scene.

EXAMPLE: In “Miss Louisa and the Outlaws,” we want to know what will happen to the outlaws, Miss Louisa, and the students. The playwright uses the resolution scene to tell us that the outlaws will go to jail, Miss Louisa will get a reward, and the students will get to go home early.

The resolution scene should be short. Remember, the audience knows the play is nearly over, and some people may lose interest very quickly following the climax scene.

If you want to teach a lesson or have a moral, one of the characters can state it during the resolution scene. For example, at the end of "Miss Louisa and the Outlaws," William says that courage is acting bravely when you are most afraid.

Using Your Playwriting Skills

How can you use your new playwriting skills? Here are four suggestions. You may choose to do just one of them, or you may do more than one. If you like, try all four — the decision is yours!

- Using the diagram on page 3, write a brief outline of a play. Be as creative as you like. Develop interesting characters and settings. Your final outline might consist of five paragraphs, one for each part of the play.
- Choose one type of scene. If you have already made an outline, you may use one of those scenes. Write out the scene completely.
- Write a complete play. Include all the elements of a play that are described in the project.
- If you have written either a scene or a play, ask your teacher if you can stage it. You do not need costumes, make-up, or scenery. Instead, focus on developing interesting characters and plot.

Have fun!

SCENE 1
TOM: *Handwritten scribbles*
LUCY: *Handwritten scribbles*
TOM: *Handwritten scribbles*

SCENE 2
LUCY: *Handwritten scribbles*
BETH: *Handwritten scribbles*
TOM: *Handwritten scribbles*
LUCY: *Handwritten scribbles*

SCENE 3
BETH: *Handwritten scribbles*
TOM: *Handwritten scribbles*
LUCY: *Handwritten scribbles*