How many times have you struggled with the same physics lesson while your students stared out the window? How often have you tried to teach the complex issues that led to World War II and found that students still didn’t fully understand? Consider playwriting to enliven your classroom and connect students to the material in entirely new ways.

Writing a short play can help students understand the human drama behind major historical events, or even express the gravitational forces between the planets in a creative and insightful way. Plays are usually fun for students to write—but when they seek advice on how to get started, teachers who don’t normally teach playwriting are often stumped. Here are some tips about the basics that will help you support your students’ efforts:

**Getting started.** Different playwrights start their plays in different ways. Some create a really compelling character, either in their heads or on paper, then put that character into an interesting situation. Others start with a dramatic situation, like an argument or a betrayal between two characters, then spend some time figuring out what kind of characters they’d like to put into that situation. Still others start with one great line of dialogue they really have to use, then figure out who needs to say it and at what point it should be said. There’s no "right" way to start a play—whatever works for your students is fine.

**Short works.** Some students are overwhelmed by the thought of having to write a whole script. So why not start with a monologue—a single dramatic speech for a single character, usually charged with emotion and inner conflict? Once a student has finished writing this piece, ask him or her to write a speech in which a second character responds to the monologue. Now you have a dialogue between two characters. The student should be able to continue from there on his or her own, line by line.

**Conflict is key.** Remind your students that the essence of drama is conflict. Without conflict, a play isn’t really a play. Each character should be striving to achieve a different goal—and those goals should be opposed to one another. For instance, in a science play about the forces that control Earth’s orbit around the Sun, "Mr. Gravity" could be struggling to pull the two stellar bodies together while "Mrs. Centrifugal Force" tries to drive them apart.

**Hero vs. Villain.** It’s often useful to remind your students to think in terms of having a single protagonist (or hero) and one or more antagonists (villains). Having multiple protagonists usually makes a play too complex, while having just one hero gives an audience one character to focus on—and root for. A play may have other characters, but the hero and villain are essential.

**No stock characters.** Remind your students that key characters like the hero and the villain need to have two important qualities for a play to be successful: they need to be believable, and they also need to be unique. To make a character believable, give him or her ordinary traits—a shy smile, a constant craving for pizza, a fear of heights—instead of unrealistic qualities like superhuman strength or a genius IQ. To make a character unique, give him or her one or two unusual traits, like a severe speech impediment or a quest to climb a mountain.
**Goodbye to grammar.** One of the hardest things for students to master about playwriting is creating realistic dialogue. Students often write dialogue that consists of complete sentences, but people rarely talk in complete sentences! Suggest that your students throw their grammar textbooks out the window, at least until the playwriting exercise is over. And ask them to spend a few minutes each day outside of class listening—*really* listening—to how people speak. No two people have the same speech patterns, and no two characters should talk the same way either.

**Going from good to great.** Finally, students often have trouble revising plays once they are written—they don't know how to make their plays clearer and easier for an audience to capture, or more dramatic in some way. The best way to help them out with this problem is to give them a chance to hear their plays read aloud by their fellow students. There’s nothing like listening to your dialogue and seeing your characters come alive to determine whether the elements of your play are coming together—and there’s nothing like an impromptu play reading to keep a classroom lively and energized.

If you use these suggestions, your students will have no trouble using playwriting to demonstrate their knowledge of whatever subject you teach, or express their ideas about a topic in a “right-brained” way. Most importantly, you'll support students who learn in less traditional ways—if they struggle with rote memorization, they might just love playwriting. Give it a shot.

About the Author

*Gwydion Suilebhan is a playwright, poet, and journalist who taught writing and literature at the middle school and college levels for seven years. His publications include* Inner Harbor: Ten Poems, the Foreword to The Complete Idiot's Guide to Grammar and Style, and more than 75 articles on education, writing, and cuisine.*