

## Play Structure the Easy Way

The legendary playwright and dramaturg Leon Katz once described the two essential elements of play structure as follows. He said that in the beginning, what's going on should make the audience say, "that's interesting"—and want to stay with the play. By the end, "that's interesting" should turn to "wow." Of course, turning "that's interesting" into "wow" is easier said than done, and most of us need a clearer road map than that.

And that's what play structure is: a road map for the play...and for the audience. Yes, the audience. Ever remember being a kid in the back seat of the car and asking, "Are we there yet?" Play structure is like a series of road signs that tells the audience where they are on the journey.

### Three-Act Structure

The most common structure out there is what people call "three-act structure." It's how most Hollywood movies are structured. In this case, you'll break your play into three parts. Let's call them—big surprise—the beginning, middle and end. Here's how it works:

We'll start with two characters, Jack and Jill. Jack wants Jill's pail of water. Jill says no. Conflict.

If Jack says, "Fine. Have a nice day, Jill," the play is over. He can't do this. There must be a really good reason why Jack can't walk away. Maybe he's dying of thirst. Jill has the only water for miles, and if Jack doesn't get water in the next ten minutes, he's going to die. There is now something at stake; if Jack doesn't get the water, there's a consequence: he'll die. And not only that, there's what we call "a ticking clock." The play has a sense of urgency. All this can happen in the beginning (aka Act I).

As we move to the middle (Act II), Jack changes tactics. Maybe he bribes Jill with money or a goldfish. Maybe he threatens to beat her up or tries to trick her. But Jill needs the water too. She has to wash her dog before it competes in a dog show, and her family needs the prize money or they'll starve to death. Whatever the reason, it has to be good. And remember, Jack is running out of time. Things are getting desperate.

That leaves the end (Act III). By the end of a play, four things can happen:

- Jack gets what he wants. He takes the pail from Jill and drains it on the spot. Jill's family is out of luck.
- Jill gets what she wants. Jack may drop dead, but the dog wins the show and Jill's family gets the prize money.

- They both get what they want. Jack drinks enough to get to the next water hole, but Jill has some water left—the dog gets second place, which still nets them some prize money. Not as much as before, but enough to get by.
- Neither gets what they want. They fight over the pail, spill the water, and everybody's miserable.

And that's three-act structure. The beginning introduces the characters, the conflict, the stakes and a ticking clock. The middle builds the conflict and develops the characters as they change tactics. In the end, they either get it or they don't.

### **The Pebble and the Puddle**

Personally, I like to think of play structure in terms of a simple visual: A pebble and a puddle. That's right—think of the world of your play as a still puddle. Then, a pebble hits the water. Ripples happen. The world of the play is now in motion. At some point, the ripples will stop, but guess what: The pebble is still in the water. In other words, the world of the play is somehow different than it was at the beginning.

### **More Structures**

Of course, there are many other structural possibilities out there. Below are just a few, and keep in mind that these structures are not mutually exclusive. It's possible for a play to have elements of more than one type of structure in it.

- **Anecdotal structure.** Imagine a variety of characters, each on their own journeys, but at some point, those journeys intersect. For example, maybe they all pass through a certain train station.
- **Process structure.** Process plays are structured around some particular event or action. For example, two friends are having dinner. When dinner ends, so does the play. Or maybe, like in August Wilson's *Fences*, a man is building a fence...
- **Landscape structure.** We begin with very little information about where we are or the given circumstances of the play—almost like an artist's empty canvas. But as the play continues, it fills in more and more of the landscape. An example is Beckett's *Endgame*, in which only gradually does the picture become clear. All good plays have a certain amount of landscape in them.
- **Gapped structure.** Imagine a series of scenes, and between each one, time has passed (e.g., hours, months, even years). It's the job of the audience to discover during each scene what has happened since the previous scene. They are, in a sense, playing detective as they catch up to the new situation of the characters.

Whatever structure you choose, just remember that you're in the business of building road signs.