

From Scene to Seen

A play, or drama, is different from other stories in several important ways.

First, unlike a work of fiction written in paragraphs, a play is not created just to be read. It's meant to be performed and watched—to come alive on stage in a theater. In this way, a play is a collaboration between the author and the people who perform the play.

While a novelist or short-story author can use long, descriptive passages to create images in the reader's mind, a playwright provides only brief descriptions and directions for others to use in creating each scene. Most of the words in a play are part of the dialogue—the conversations between characters.

Can you imagine some of the challenges of performing a play?

One is the presentation of settings—the place and time in which each scene of the play happens. A novel or short story can move seamlessly from one location to the next, just because the writer says so.

A play's settings, though, must be swapped out during the performance by a stage crew. The playwright provides some details to guide the building of stage sets, but most of the work of imagining and creating the setting is left to the director and the set designer.

This page-to-stage transformation applies to characters as well as settings. While a fiction writer can devote long paragraphs to describing a character, a playwright sums up each character's appearance and personality briefly.

The director, actors, and stage designers then take these descriptions and bring the characters to life, making many creative choices along the way.

As you may have guessed, reading a play is very different from reading a novel or short story. A play looks different on the page because it includes elements that are supposed to guide the production of the play by a group of performers.

Right after the play's title, you will see two important pieces of information: the setting and the cast of characters. The setting briefly describes when and where the action should take place. The cast of characters lists the play's characters and briefly describes each one.

A scene in a play usually represents the action occurring in one place or at one period of time. The playwright identifies each scene by number: A change of scene typically involves a change of setting.

The most important feature of a play is the dialogue between the characters. The playwright clearly indicates who is speaking by placing the character's name in all capital letters. Sometimes the playwright also notes the character's tone of voice, gestures, or movement on

stage. These notes appear in stage directions before and between the lines of dialogue.

What happens when you read a play instead of watching it performed on stage? You get to direct and design the play in your mind. You imagine the setting and characters just as you would when reading a novel or short story. In this case, though, you have the playwright's directions to guide your imagination.
