Theater and plays are very different than most types of literature. Most theater is fictional, meaning that it is imaginary. Lots of plays are based on true events, but they rarely show true nonfiction stories. The theater is very different because it must be acted out on a stage, which means that there is not much movement or travel happening. Plays are dialogue-heavy; the only way for actors to tell us what’s going on in the characters’ heads is to say it out loud.

Arthur Miller: Miller was an American playwright and is considered one of the best. Death of a Salesman is a play that deals with the struggles and disappointments of an aging salesman and his family.

LINDA. Biff, you can’t look around all your life, can you?
BIFF. I just can’t take hold, Mom. I can’t take hold of some kind of a life.
LINDA. Biff, a man is not a bird, to come and go with the springtime.
Biff. Your hair … [He touches her hair] Your hair got grey.
LINDA. Oh, it’s been grey since you were in high school. I just stopped dyeing it, that’s all.
Biff. Dye it again, will ya? I don’t want my pal looking old.
LINDA. You’re such a boy! You think you can go away for a year and … You’ve got to get it into your head now that one day you’ll knock on this door and there’ll be strange people here –

-Death of a Salesman (1949)

How does a play get its ideas across differently from a novel?
**William Shakespeare:** Shakespeare wrote some of the world’s most popular plays. His play *King Lear* is about an aging King who is tricked into betraying his one honest daughter (Cordelia) by her two cruel sisters.

[King Lear’s palace]

*Enter one bearing a coronet, then King Lear, Cornwall, Albany, Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, and Attendants.*

**LEAR.** To thee and thine hereditary ever
Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom,
No less in space, validity, and pleasure,
Than that conferr’d on Goneril.—Now, our joy,
Although our last and least, to whose young love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
Strive to be interest’d, what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters’? Speak.

**CORDELIA.** Nothing, my lord.

**LEAR.** Nothing?

**CORDELIA.** Nothing.

**LEAR.** Nothing will come of nothing, speak again.

**CORDELIA.** Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty
According to my bond, no more nor less.

- *King Lear* (1606)

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**Sam Shepard:** Shepard is a modern American playwright whose plays deal with family struggles and the myth of the American West.

**AUSTIN:** It’s only an outline. We’re not writing an entire script now.

**LEE:** Well ya’ can’t leave things out even if it is an outline
It’s one a’ the most important parts. Ya’ can’t go leavin’ it out.

**AUSTIN:** Okay, okay. Let’s just get it done. Now, he’s in
the truck and he’s got his horse trailer and his horse.

**AUSTIN:** We’ve already established that.

**LEE:** And he sees this other guy comin’ up behind him in
another truck. And that truck is pullin’ a gooseneck.

**AUSTIN:** What’s a gooseneck?

**LEE:** Like on a cattle trailer. You know the kind with a
gooseneck, goes right down in the bed a’ the pick-up.

**AUSTIN:** Oh, all right. (types)

**LEE:** It’s important.

**AUSTIN:** Okay, I got it.

**LEE:** All these details are important.

(Austin types as they talk)

- *True West* (1980)

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What elements of this quote let you know it is a play to be performed?

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________________________________________________________________________
How to Write a Screenplay for a Theater Production  
(A Play in One Scene)

SCENE 1.

This part sets the stage. It gives directions for how the stage looks, who is on stage and where they are. We can tell it is not the dialogue because the word SCENE (and which scene it is) is written before in capital letters and the text is set far to the right. There are many ways to do this, but the function is the same; screen directions must be easy to tell from dialogue. There are two Quaker style chairs in the middle of an otherwise empty and well lit stage. On the left is Playwright 1, on the right is Playwright 2.

(We enter the scene in the middle of a discussion. This is an action and it is different from a stage setting so it has to look different on the page. In this case, set in the middle and in parenthesis.)

PLAYWRIGHT 1. When a character is speaking, their name is put first, in all capital letters, this way we know who is speaking.

PLAYWRIGHT 2. Now it is my turn to speak but how would anyone be sure we're speaking to each other?

PLAYWRIGHT 1. (to PLAYWRIGHT 2) We could write a screen direction, or we can expect people to understand based on the how the stage is set and that we're the only ones here.

PLAYWRIGHT 2. Yes, and it is better to put the action in parenthesis, after the character doing it. This is best way, there are rules and without them we'll never know what is going on.

PLAYWRIGHT 1. There are rules, but the most important one is to be consistent and make yourself understood. The best way to learn is to try writing your own play.

PLAYWRIGHT 2. I prefer stricter rules, now that the play is finished we end it with FINIS, set in all capitals and the middle of the page, the last word we read.

PLAYWRIGHT 1. FINIS is fine but it's French, we can also use END OF THE PLAY.

END OF THE PLAY