

THE LONDON PLAYWRIGHTS'
WORKSHOP GUIDE TO



Formatting
your
stage play.

The London Playwrights' Workshop Guide to Formatting your Stage Play

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Introduction

By Kimberley Andrews

Formatting a stage play can feel a bit like a guessing game. Unlike writing for television, there are no set industry standards for formatting a play in the UK, and this can leave writers feeling just a bit vague about what's acceptable or expected of them.

Reading plays is a useful way to get an idea of what an acceptable format looks like but this doesn't provide all the answers in terms of creating it for yourself. It can be hard to know what spacing to use, what to include in your stage directions or how to format your play in the least time consuming way.

If you're new to writing for the stage, you'll want to know what the 'rules' are - what should you include in your script? Should you start a new scene on a new page? These details might seem basic but they really do count - a well formatted play not only looks professional but also provides a reliable blueprint for the creative team if your play gets produced.

Even if you're a more experienced writer, it can be hard to know if you're on the right track with formatting (if you've ever decided to overhaul the format of your whole script as a form of procrastination when redrafting, you'll know what I mean!). Perhaps you've been using a format that is time consuming and laborious to put together, or maybe you've never really given much thought to whether the way you are presenting your play is helping you to show off your writing in the best way possible.

The key with formatting is to remember that it's all about writing a clear, consistent and professional looking script that ultimately, is easy to read. It's not about following overly complex rules, making things look super fancy or creating extra work for yourself.

We've put together this guide with the aim of simplifying formatting so that you can spend more time on the creative side of writing. We hope you'll find it useful and perhaps learn some new tricks along the way!

Fonts, Size and Spacing

First things first, choose your font. Yes, there's a range of *super* LOVELY fonts out there and it might be tempting to make your script **stand out** from the crowd by using a *fancy one*. But please, keep your font as boring as possible!

Why? Firstly, fancy fonts can be tricky to read, especially in a smaller size. Secondly, not all fonts are available to everyone - if you send your script to someone who is using an older version of Word for example, it might not display properly and this might mess up the spacing and formatting in the whole document! **Eurgh!**

Thirdly, your script is the writing equivalent of the first impression you make walking into a job interview. Now, we're all for self expression but that *elaborate font just might not give off the right vibes...*

So which fonts are acceptable? Good old Courier New, **Arial** or Times New Roman (or something similarly basic) are about as wacky as you want to be when choosing your fonts.

Size

This bit is simple. Stick to size 11.5 or 12. Worried your play is too long? Don't even think about shrinking that text down to reduce your page count! The reader will see right through it and it won't compensate for rigorous editing. Likewise, ramping things up to size 16 won't cover up the fact your story needs fleshing out. Sorry.

Spacing

Set the spacing between lines to 'single' as double spacing between will make your play look much longer than it actually is. You can create a double space between different character's speeches by pressing the return key (we'll show you an example of how this looks on the page later). Sticking to this format not only looks coherent, but it will also allow the reader to estimate the running time more effectively.

Title Page

All you need on your title page is (you guessed it) the title, along with your name and contact details. You really don't need anything fancy to go with it, such as an image or description - but you can indicate what medium it is for, such as a stage play, radio play or television script.

TIP If you're submitting your play to a competition, don't forget to check if they want anonymous submissions and remove your name if necessary. If you do remove your name and contact details, don't forget that the text on the following page will move up, so make sure you adjust it accordingly otherwise you'll mess the spacing up in the whole document!

THE BEST PLAY EVER

A stage play

By Kimberley Andrews

Address
Phone number
Email address

Agent Details
(if you have one)

Character List

The first page in your play should be a list of characters and our top tip is to keep it simple and stick to necessary information only. There's no need to provide pages of character backstory, acting notes, directorial advice - and definitely no artist's impressions of the characters faces!

Technically speaking, you shouldn't have to include this page at all. After all, everything we need to know about your characters should be conveyed through the things they do in the play. However, the character list is useful for someone reading your play, as it provides a quick clear rundown of the basics in the absence of seeing it on stage.

If you have multiple roles in your play which can be played by the same character, you can also include it on this page (and this helps to show that the piece can be performed with the minimal amount of actors).

You can also put down any essential details about the time or place the play is set.

And lastly, this is the space to include any notes on grammar/punctuation - such as using a / for overlapping speech (more explanation of this to come later).

Character List

Bette, 46 - a GP, originally from Paris

Jack, 18 - Bette's son, an art student

Petra, 18 - Jack's girlfriend, an art student from Leeds

A Librarian

The Prime Minister

Petra and Librarian can be played by the same actor.

The action is set in Islington, London in 1972.

In the text, / denotes overlapping speech. Pauses are indicated by a space between lines.

Sample Acceptable Layouts

Below you will find some examples of ways to format your script. There are, of course, many options in terms of formatting and you might want to combine the principles of a couple of these examples. This isn't exhaustive, but should give you an idea of what's acceptable.

Example 1: Times New Roman/ Size 12

Scene 1

Describe the location and setting here, along with opening stage directions.

Character #1: Dialogue here

Stage directions in italics.

Character #2: Dialogue here

Character #1: Make sure multiple lines of dialogue are single spaced. If you don't have enough space at the end of the page to put the whole speech, either start on the next page or continue the speech over the page, repeating the character name and using the word 'continued'

Character #1 (continued): You can also abbreviate this to 'Cont'd'

End of scene

Example 2: Courier New/ Size 11

SCENE 1.

Describe location and setting here, along with opening stage directions.

CHARACTER #1:

Dialogue here, continuing
Like this.

CHARACTER #2:

Dialogue here.

Stage directions.

END OF SCENE.

Example 3. Arial/ size 11

Scene 11.

Describe location and setting, along with opening stage directions here.

CHARACTER #1 Dialogue here.

CHARACTER #2 Dialogue here.

Stage directions.

CHARACTER #1 Dialogue here.

Which format is right for you?

As you can see, these formats are slightly different but follow the same premise in that character names, dialogue and stage directions are clearly differentiated through the use of bold, italics, underlining or capitalisation.

It's worth playing around in Word to see which format you feel most comfortable with (or experimenting with combining a couple of these), some formats might not work for you on the page and if you feel you can't read them clearly, it won't help you through the editing process later.

Some of these formats are trickier to do in Word (rather than in writing software, more on this later!) due to keeping the spacing consistent (such as example 2, the Courier new option where the dialogue is in the middle of the page⁰. We've all been there when for no explicable reason, Word decides not to comply with our line spacing, and it's beyond frustrating! So we'd recommend using the format you find least fiddly.

The last thing you want to do is waste time messing around with spacing, so, choose the option you find easiest to work with, not the one you feel looks the nicest on the page (although that is a bonus too!)

Headers and Footers

Don't forget, whatever format you choose, you'll need to include page numbers! Always add these to the top right hand corner as it makes life easier for the creative team when using a hardcopy of the script in rehearsal.

It's also useful to include a header in a small font (size 8 or 9, containing the title of the play, your name and your email address/contact number. Including this is particularly useful if someone is reading a hard copy of your script; if your title page gets lost, at least your name and details are still there! And if a page goes astray, they will know who it belongs to.

For example:

New Play by Kimberley Andrews contact@londonplaywrights.org

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IMPORTANT! Do remember to remove the header if you are required to submit anonymously!

Footer

You shouldn't need to include a footer in your script unless there is something essential which you need to refer the reader to, for example, the definition of a slang word or a translation.

Stage directions

Stage directions can be a contentious issue! What should you include? Should you write them in creative prose or simple, functional language? Does anyone bother reading them anyway?

If you read a classic play by the likes of Ibsen or Chekov, you're sure to find a hefty bunch of long, descriptive stage directions but these have most certainly diminished in modern times.

For a while, long stage directions were really out of favour and there was a trend for them to be super sparse but the tide does seem to be turning in the sense that some playwrights are reclaiming the stage direction and experimenting with the language they use in a creative way.

The key with stage directions is to make sure you remember their purpose (and your purpose as a playwright). The stage directions and indeed the script itself, are there to allow you to communicate your ideas to the creative team. Stage directions are not there for you to take on the job of director or actors (unless of course you are writing a play that you intend to direct and/or perform in!). Think of the script as the first layer in the collaborative process - the director, actors, and creative team will add their own layers to create what becomes the final piece on stage.

If being creative with your stage directions helps you to convey the world of the play (perhaps you're writing an experimental, abstract or futuristic piece - or something which relies on physical action rather than dialogue), then of course, you should go ahead and use beautiful prose and imagery to communicate your vision.

However, if fancy prose isn't essential to your piece, it's worth keeping the stage directions practical and most of all, concise!

One of the pitfalls new writers often fall into is writing an opening page (or even pages) that are full of stage directions. It's easy to see why: we want to describe the setting, the location, our vision, in all its glory - and it's often as much about us trying to clarify our own ideas as it is us trying to communicate them to others.

Do bear in mind through that if you're submitting your script to a busy theatre, a lot (if not everything) rests on those opening pages. Do your lengthy stage directions really give you the chance to show off your fantastic writing? Remember, if a reader is pushed for time, they are likely to skim over these dense blocks of writing to get to the action - it's much more effective to have a few important details which are read properly, than including everything and having it skimmed over.

DO INCLUDE

- ✓ Essential details such as the passing of time and a change of location.
- ✓ A brief description of the setting - including any significant objects (props) which are used in the scene.

DON'T INCLUDE

- ✗ Notes for the actors, such as how to deliver a line or when to breathe!
 - ✗ Lighting design (include blackout, if absolutely necessary but leave it to the lighting designer where possible).
- Backstory or explanations (this should all be in the text).

The stage or a real place?

Should you describe the setting as though it were on stage or, as though you are actually in that location?

For example:

The stage is set with two sofas facing each other, a TV and a lamp.

OR

John's living room. John and Lizzie sit on sofas facing each other.

This is personal preference and will come down to what sort of play you are writing. If your play is Beckett-esque, and the setting is open to interpretation, you'll probably want to make it clear that the setting is a stage.

For example:

A bare stage, with a solitary chair in the centre.

However, if you are writing something more naturalistic, there's no reason why you can't just describe the place. Unless you are producing it yourself and assuming the role of director/ set designer, there is really no need to work out the logistics of how the locations will work on stage. After all, this might change depending on how the space is configured wherever the play ends up being performed, so you'll be wasting your time if you work out all the logistics only for it to be changed later.

From a practical perspective, there is a lot to be said for keeping your set and props requirements to a minimum (not least because of budget!) but there is no need for this to stifle your

creativity - be bold with your stage directions and once you've got a brilliant creative team on board, it will be their job to figure out how they can make it all happen within the limitations of budget, space, time etc.

To pause or not to pause?

Just to add to our writerly woes, pauses have lately become another source of conflicting views.

In times gone by, a standard...

Pause

OR

Beat (a short pause)

...would suffice! But there's an argument to say that technically speaking, this is 'directing from the page'. Could you rely on the actors themselves to decide when to insert the relevant pauses? After all, they will need to breathe from time to time and they are likely to do this at a point which feels natural in the dialogue!

Lots of playwrights now are also experimenting with how to do denote the pause on the page. Instead of writing the word 'pause', they might simply leave a space between the dialogue.

For example:

Kate: Nice to meet you

← *Notice the gap here!*

Kate: Do you want to come with me?

Mike: Whatever

Other writers might use a full stop to show a pause:

Kate: Nice to meet you

.

Kate: Do you want to come with me?

Mike: Whatever

It's absolutely fine to use whichever method you feel most comfortable with but whatever you choose, and this extends to all things formatting, just be consistent! Decide on what's right for you and make sure you stick to it throughout the entire script, otherwise, things will become confusing!

Punctuation and Grammar

As a playwright, the words you choose are not the only way to convey your ideas. Punctuation and grammar also play a big part in how you communicate with an audience or reader. But remember, you don't have to follow the 'normal' rules - you can play with punctuation, and with how the text looks on the page, depending on what you're trying to show.

For example:

The '/' (as used by Caryl Churchill and subsequently many others) to denote overlapping speech.

... to show dialogue tapering off or a brief pause.

- to denote the character being interrupted.

You should feel empowered to make up rules of your own if it helps you to get your ideas across! However, if you're doing something out of the ordinary, don't forget to make a note of it at the start of your play - usually on the character list page or on a separate page afterwards if you don't have room.

And - we know we keep banging on about this - but, whatever you choose to do - always be consistent!!

Software

There is plenty of writing software out there which you can use to save you time when formatting your script. Some writers swear by using software, others prefer trusty old Word!

The fact is, it really doesn't matter if you use writing software or not. If the thought of getting to grips with yet another 'thing' fills you with dread, or perhaps you're a whizz with Word because you've used it since forever, then you can create just as a professional looking script *without* software as you can with it.

However, perhaps you really hate the idea of messing around with spacing and making things bold etc on Word, or you've already tried it and find the whole thing messy and time consuming, in which case, trying out some software is most definitely worth a shot.

Software options

Like all things tech, there are lots of options when it comes to software and a quick google will bring up plenty of choices. Some popular options are listed below, some are on the pricier side, others have free options, and there are pros and cons to each of them which will depend on what you need from writing software. It's a good idea to check out all the different options, thinking about what's important to you - and what will make your writing life easier.

We've decided against providing tutorials in the various writing softwares because things change and get updated all the time! Plus, we're not experts on every type of software and every writer will have different priorities!

Popular software options

Final Draft (www.finaldraft.com)

Celtx (www.celtx.com)

Scrivener (www.scrivener.com)

Writer Duet (www.writerduet.com)

Fade In (www.fadeinpro.com)

Using Word Shortcuts

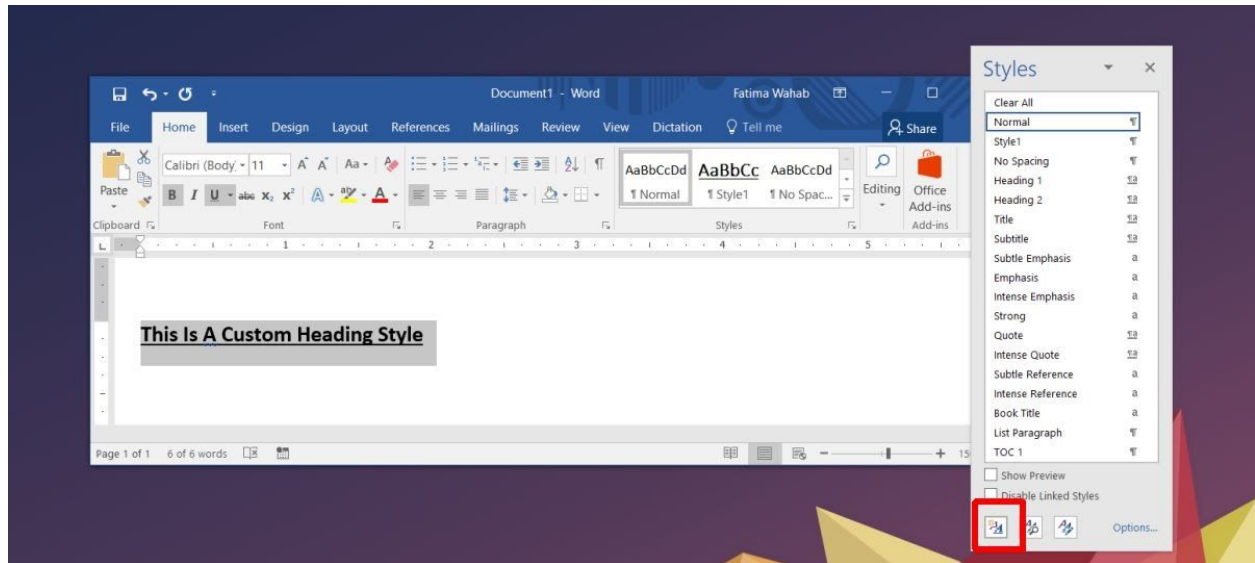
If the thought of formatting your script using Word seems time consuming, then you might want to consider creating a template and assigning shortcut keys. This might sound complicated, but spending a little time setting this up will save you a heap of time later - it's almost the equivalent of creating your own writing software. How clever is that?

It's actually pretty straightforward to create shortcuts using Word - although, be warned, it might take a little bit of trial and error to get it right straightaway!

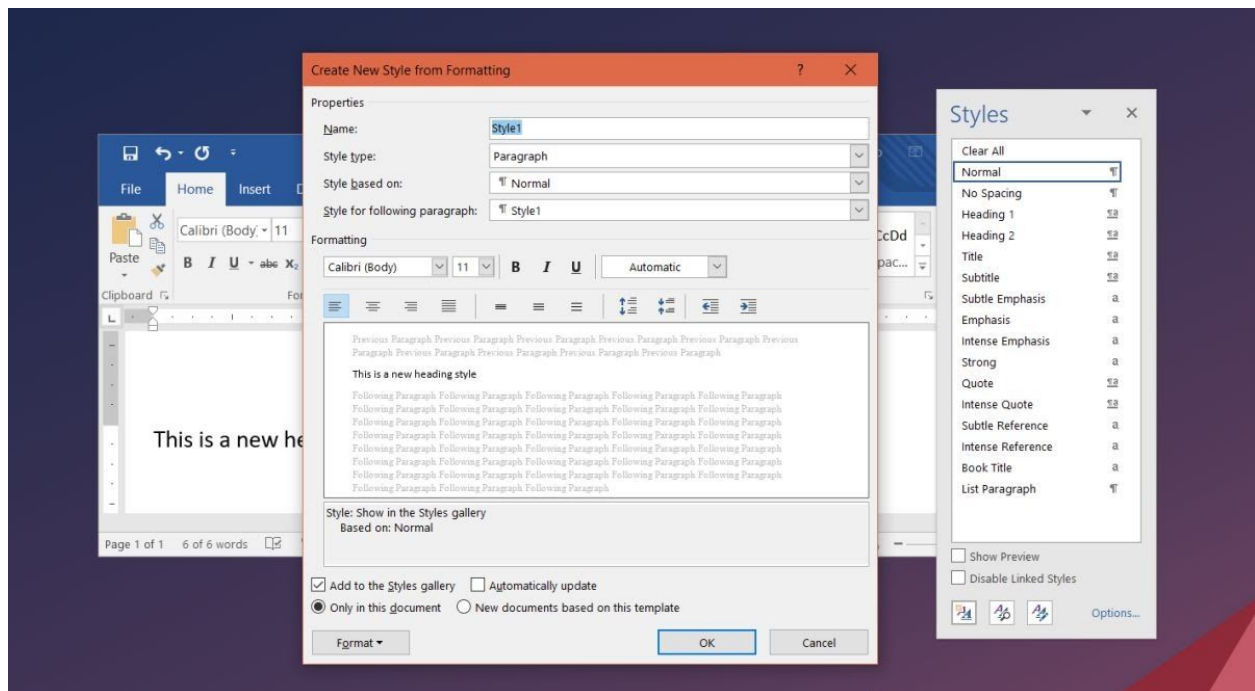
Step by Step Guide to setting up shortcuts

- Format a line of text as you want it to look (eg, Character names in bold). Eg: **Character 1:**
- Click on the 'Styles' menu (often found on the top toolbar, depending on how you have Word configured).
- Click the 'New Style' icon at the bottom of the menu (see image below) which will open in a new window.
- Edit the name of the style (eg, character names or dialogue).
- Still in the New Styles menu, check in the preview box that the formatting is how you want it to be.
- Click 'Format' in the bottom right corner.
- Click 'Shortcut Key'.
- Assign a shortcut key of your choice (tip: don't use a letter on its' own otherwise every time you type that letter it will mess with your formatting. A good option is to use the CTRL key along with a letter pressed at the same time - make it something memorable, such as CTRL 'd' for dialogue, CTRL 's' for scene heading etc).
- Press 'OK'.
- When writing, you can then press your chosen shortcut key before typing and it will format the text accordingly.

In the image below, you can see the 'Styles' menu, and the 'New Style' Icon, marked by the red square, bottom right.



When you click on the 'New Style' icon, this window will pop up. Notice the format drop down button in the bottom left hand corner? Click this and you'll be able to assign your shortcut key.



TIP you can use this method to create a template for all of your plays, so you only need to do the work once. Just set it all up and then every time you start a new piece, open it, and use 'SAVE AS' to save it as your new piece of work. The template will remain in place for your next use, and the shortcut keys should transfer to your new document.

And don't forget, if all of this seems a little complicated, there is absolutely nothing wrong with just sticking with Word and formatting as you go along, it actually doesn't take up that much time once you are in the swing of things!

Supporting materials

Should you include additional materials in your script such as images, links to other websites, historical information, a synopsis - and if so, where should you put such information?

In short, the answer is no. You shouldn't need to include anything else in your script, apart from, well, the actual script! It shouldn't be necessary to include a synopsis, after all we'll find out what happens in the play when we read it. And any essential information should be included in the text itself - after all, the audience won't see your additional documents when they watch the play!

That said, these rules aren't set in stone. You might be writing a piece that is about a very niche subject and some context might be absolutely necessary. If this is the case, then just make sure you avoid including *too much* extra information - a short paragraph and a nudge in the right direction of where to find out more is usually plenty!

If you are going to include any additional information in this way, we'd recommend putting the page at the start of the script after the character list - but be warned, there's every chance a rushed reader might skip it in order to spend more time reading your play (that said, there's nothing to say the reader won't come back to it later if they are interested in your work!).

Top formatting tips

1. Choose a clear, standard font that is widely available on various versions of Word (such as Times New Roman, Courier New or Arial).
2. Size 11 - 12 only, please!
3. Always write in black!
4. Make sure your details are clear and correct on the title page and in your header..
5. Except for when you are submitting anonymously, then remove your details (and check whether the spacing of your document has been altered due to this)
6. Never forget to include page numbers!
7. Avoid providing lengthy descriptions of your characters or additional materials.
8. Start new scenes on a new page.
9. If possible, avoid having a character's lines continue over onto the next page. If you don't have space for their whole speech, just start the whole thing on the next page..
10. Unless...it's a very long speech or monologue. In which case, repeat the character's name on the next page and write the word 'continued' next to it. So..

CHARACTER #1 (continued):

[FYI: You can also use Cont'd for short]

11. Always do a final check to make sure your spacing is correct, especially if you decide to convert your document to a PDF.
12. Check for typos/ spelling errors!
13. And yes, we've said it before but BE CONSISTENT!
14. Don't get bogged down with creating something fancy, it just has to be easy to read!
15. Remember, your script is a calling card not only for your writing, but for you! Keep it neat, clear, polished and professional!

Outro

We hope you found this guide useful and it helps you to format your next piece of work. Whilst we are not claiming to be any sort of authority on formatting, we've worked with enough scripts to know what's acceptable, and what helps to make things clearer. We're sure that if you use the tips in this guide, you'll create professional looking scripts, and you will save time on formatting - which hopefully you'll be able to spend coming up with new creative ideas!

END OF PLAY.

Last tip, include this at the end!