

Plot

This term is used to describe what happens, and when. It is the story that is to be told through the action and how the telling of it is organised. The plot can be linear (a straight line), telling the story chronologically (in time order), but this isn't always the case. Reviewers of plays sometimes write about a play's plot 'bending and twisting', suggesting that the storyline is not a linear, chronological account.

Plot will be influenced by the nature of the content of the drama. So, a plot based on historical events may well be more straightforward than one based on complicated personal relationships. The plot can also be centred on an object or other focus. Good examples here from well-known stories are the ring in *Lord of the Rings* and the sword, Excalibur, in the legends of King Arthur. Sometimes a quest may be the purpose of the plot or there may be several storylines in a plot running side by side until, later, they all come together.

Alan Ayckbourn has written plays that are linked to each other, e.g. *Separate Tables*, while Shakespeare wrote several plays that taken together cover a period in history, e.g. from *Richard III* to *Henry V*.

It is important not to mix up plot and **structure**. Plot is to do with content and the meaning and purpose of the action. Structure is how the meaning is communicated or the purpose achieved. In drama the two are sometimes interlinked. For example, in classical Greek drama, the device of *deus ex machina* was used when the playwright had a plot that could not be resolved easily, or happily. Here, the playwright arranged for a god character to swing in by crane, as if from the heavens. This god character was then able to use supernatural powers to dismiss the problem faced by the mere human characters on stage.

You can find out more about the seven basic plots on page 174 in **Unit 2.5**.

Social, political, historical and cultural contexts

Social, political, historical and cultural contexts can affect character, context and plot, so it is important to consider them

both when developing your drama and when looking at existing texts. Ask yourself questions such as:

- Was the writer influenced by the culture in which they lived?
- Did the culture of the time in which they lived restrict what could be written about?
- Were there social conventions or political pressures that forced the writer to write in a particular way, or to avoid issues?
- Or is the opposite true? Did the writer deliberately set out to make a point, to challenge or even shock?

Social, political, historical and cultural contexts can be defined as the circumstances, influences, restrictions, messages that a context can bring both to the nature of a work and to the

situation of a practitioner. This applies whether the practitioner is someone else or you.

Examples include Blue Blouse theatre in Russia, where practitioners were trying to inform and energise the workers; Joan Littlewood and her theatre **workshop**, especially *Oh What a Lovely War*; Steven Berkoff's political comment in *Sink the Belgrano!* Scripts whose form has been affected by censorship include *The Falklands Play* by Ian Curteis. This television play about the Falklands War, written in the late 1980s, was banned by the BBC and not aired for seven years.

Another type of influence occurred when Dario Fo wrote

▼ Italian political playwright Dario Fo is a big admirer of **commedia dell'arte**. You can see its influence in his plays such as *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (below), which retells the story of how a police suspect managed to fall out of an upstairs window during questioning.



plays criticising the politicians and the police force in his country, Italy. The plays made the people he was criticising very uncomfortable, so they started turning up in numbers at performances and treating the plays as a send-up of what was happening. This spoilt the point Fo was trying to make, and he had to change the way he presented his plays.

Examiner hints

The examiners will expect to see that when devising, you understand and have thought about character, context and plot.

For **character**, they will want to see that you had a definite idea in mind when developing a character and that you have thought about what sort of character it is, and what factors will allow the character to communicate to the audience. They will also look at whether you have considered the intention of the playwright.

Aspects of design could also be very important here. What costume would be worn, and how might this add to the impact of the character? Is make-up appropriate or necessary? And if so, what sort of design might be needed?

With **context**, the examiners will expect you to have thought out what are the implications or consequences of where and when a play is set. They will expect you to show evidence of this in your devising as well. You need to understand what impact the time or location may have on how characters behave and speak.

The examiners will expect you to understand the purpose of **plot** and to recognise it in texts you have studied, as well as be able to demonstrate it in work you have devised.

You can use plot as a shorthand for describing story, or you might consciously reject story in favour of a different approach (see comments on *Waiting for Godot* on page 27).

Drama challenges

- Write or devise verbally with others the scenario for the next scene following Scenario C on page 82. What will we learn about the two characters from the scenario for the next scene? How will an audience learn more about the two characters just by looking and listening?
- Choose a character from one of the plays you are studying. Using the checklist on page 10, prepare a profile for the character as if you were going to play the role. Devise a short scene where your character meets one or more of the other characters in the play you are studying. What design issues might there be? How could you make your scene more effective through the use of lighting, sound, costume and make-up?

How to excel

Character and context go together well because they have an effect on each other. To gain higher grades, you will need to integrate your thinking about them so that the examiners can see that you know that for meaning to be communicated about a character, there has to be an understanding about the situation in which the character is placed.

Use the list on page 10 when thinking about developing character, or when assessing a character in a play.

Explain the function of the character. Is the character there to help the story along, simply a means of reflecting life, or is the character used as a way of telling the audience something?

Examiners will notice not just if you have thought out the characteristics of a role and the context that might affect the character, but also if you have a clear idea of the purpose and function of the character within the plot.

Stretch your skills

- Find out about *commedia dell'arte* and its stock characters. Look at the **Resources** list at the end of this book (page 254) if you need help in finding information.

2.5 Structuring Drama

Your aims

You are going to explore a range of **structures** for devising drama which you can select from and adapt when you create your own dramas.

Rationale: It is vital as you come to develop your own ideas that you know the possibilities for structuring drama that are available. Most playwrights draw on standard, well tried and tested structures – their scripts are never totally original and draw to a large extent on what has gone before. Similarly, you shouldn't burden yourself with thinking that everything you devise has to be totally original. Of course, within any standard structure or **plot** line, there are infinite ways to make it distinctively your own. But, especially when you are devising as a group, it is helpful to have a basic unifying structure to give the drama an overall shape.

Skills and understanding you will develop

- **Genre:** You will continue to extend your understanding by working with different **genres** and **performance styles**.
- **In rehearsal:** You will work with a range of practical drama **techniques** and experiment with some of the standard ways of structuring drama.
- **Contexts:** You will be acting as **Performer** and **Designer** as you implement each structure. You will also draw on the other two Contexts – **Deviser** and **Director** – whilst focusing on *Area of Study 2: Structure*.

The projects will provide ideas and develop devising skills that will prepare you to tackle *Unit 2 Drama in the Making* and the Performer (devised) Brief and Deviser Brief for *Unit 3 From Concept to Creation*.

Record which of the four Contexts – Performer, Director, Deviser or Designer – you focused on. List the skills you are developing, your level of competence and what you need to improve.

Let's start by looking at a range of structures that you might choose to use at any point in your course.

The 'dead warrior'

In this structure, you will be **starting with the end of the story**, using as your starting point the example of a 'dead warrior'. Take a look at the warrior's costume on the right.

A drama based on this would recreate the warrior's story through a series of **flashbacks**. This is exactly the approach in Orson Welles' classic film *Citizen Kane*, where the plot works backwards from the starting point – Kane's dying word, 'Rosebud' – and asks: 'What did it mean?' In *Citizen Kane*, Kane's life is revealed to the **audience** through the eyes of different 'witnesses', each seeing him in a different light. This adds an extra element to the structure.



Preparation

- 1 With a partner or in small groups, you are going to decide what is being signalled about the story of the warrior by the items in the photograph above – the **semiotics** of the scene. Speculate about the following:
 - Who was the warrior and what was he doing here? (His **character** and motivation)
 - What has happened here and why? (Plot)
 - Where is this taking place? (Setting or location)
 - When is it taking place? (Time frame)
 - What genre of play is this?

Look at the improvisation activities in **Unit 2.2**, pages 119–124, which build quality into the drama by adding detail. These may help you build up your information on the warrior here.

- 2 Share your speculations with another group or do this as a whole class. Take a ‘forensic’ (crime investigator’s) approach to analysing the suggestions, to check if your ideas match the evidence in the photo.

Exploration

As a whole class, use this activity to explore a location for the dead warrior:

- 1 Working on a large sheet of paper (A1 or A0, if possible) and with coloured pens/markers, collectively draw/plan the location surrounding the dead warrior.



- 2 Producing this sketch will help you think about location, but it will not be a set design. Turn it into a set design that could be created in your studio space. You are limited to using **three** items for the setting. Select these from your sketch using these questions to guide your choice:

- What needs to be communicated to the audience to support this drama?
 - What is it practical to create?
 - What will signal most effectively and efficiently to an audience?
- 3 Create your setting in your performance space.

How to excel

Don’t think too realistically. **Symbolic** representations are often easier to create. This is not a film set you are creating. A simple flag can communicate a lot – you don’t have to build a castle! Or as the influential set designer Edward Gordon Craig asked, ‘How much tree do you need to have on stage to signal forest?’



► In his 1970 production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for the Royal Shakespeare Company, Peter Brook famously set the entire play in a white box to create an ‘empty space’ for the performers. In this scene, a single coil of dangled wire has been used to signal forest.

Research hints

Never include complete downloaded pages from the Internet or pages of photocopies. This will not impress an examiner or moderator. They are interested in what you select from any information you have researched, your reason for selecting it and how you are going to use it.

The Working Record has a slightly different format for each of the three assessed units. You will find more detail in the sections on each unit which follow.

3.1 Unit 1 From Page to Stage – Controlled Assessment

Suggested structure for Unit 1 Working Record

- 1 Background, Context, Genre and Performance Style
- 2 Creating the Performance
- 3 Evaluation – What did we achieve as Performers, Directors and Designers?

Unit 1 is about exploring the possibilities offered by a **published text**, with the emphasis on working to the intentions of the playwright. This means you don't have to do any devising – the **plot** and **structure** are already there in the text. Also the **genre** and **performance style** are most likely to be fixed or heavily hinted at. By exploring the text you should be able to work out the playwright's intentions. This is the prime job of any director. Together with the designer and the performers, the director works to bring the text to life on the stage. This is why this unit has been titled *From Page to Stage*.

You will be assessed on what you put on the stage plus your Working Record. The Working Record in this unit needs to be a combined set of director's, performer's and designer's notes.

You do not have to give each of the three Contexts of **Designer**, **Director** and **Performer** equal weight. You may choose to concentrate on two of the Contexts rather than all three because

of the time you have available. If this is your decision, make sure you note it in your Working Record so that your examiners know that you have excluded one of the Contexts.

In *Unit 1* you will need to demonstrate your ability to:

- apply performance and production skills
- examine and evaluate the text and decide how it should be performed to match the playwright's intentions
- work as a team collaboratively and creatively to perform an extract from the text.

Before you start work on the extract, you will take part in a series of lessons and **workshops** with your teacher. This will help you to understand the requirements of the text and to select the extract you wish to perform. The lessons/workshops will follow a format similar to the one below. But you and your teacher can vary this to suit the way your particular group works on a text.

Preparation

You will need to discuss and establish:

- the intentions of the playwright
- the social, cultural and historical **context** of the text
- the key features of the genre and any implied performance style
- the design elements suggested by the text plus any others you think should be added
- the parts of the text that it would be fun to act, direct or design.

Working Record hints

Make a 1–2 page collection of notes, snippets from the text, diagrams and relevant photographs/images you have collected from research. This **mood board** should capture the essence of what you think the text is about (see example on next page). Remember to be selective! Everything you select should be something that is going to help you or inspire your performance of this text. The notes can be referred to later when you complete the first section of your Working Record, *Background, Context, Genre and Performance Style*.