Creative Arts – Drama  
Scriptwriting transcript  
   
(Duration 32 minutes 24 seconds)

Welcome to the HSC hub for script writing in drama. I would like to pay my respect and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we come together to learn, and also pay respects to elders both past and present. This presentation is to assist students who have chosen the scriptwriting option for the individual project. It is designed for all students no matter what stage of the scriptwriting process you are at. To start we will look at the NESA requirements for this project. This information can be found in the HSC drama assessment and reporting section on the NESA website.

Firstly, remember that you are writing a short play for theatre, not for film. I'll discuss this aspect of the project a little later in the presentation. NESA stipulates that the script is for a play which is approximately 15 minutes running time. Importantly, you must ensure that the script is between 15 to 25 A4 pages, using double spacing and size 12 Times New Roman font. If you are towards the end of the writing progress and your script is significantly shorter than this, you need to look at ways to develop the script as a script that is less than 15 pages probably doesn't let you develop the narrative or characters in great enough detail to effectively showcase your script writing ability. If your script is more than 25 pages when it is double spaced using 12 font, you must edit it down as this would be considered a breach of NESA rules. If you're at the beginning of the process, make sure you adhere to these requirements.

The project also requires students to include stage directions in sufficient detail to show how these directions work for a live production. You also must use script writing conventions such as character role list, and appropriate dialogue formatting. In getting the script ready for submission, NESA requires you have the individual project coversheet as the first page of your document. The 300 word rationale should be on the second page of the document, followed by the script itself. This needs to be saved as a PDF and named using the student's student number and the options scriptwriting. Students logbooks are to be retained by the school and be available if requested by NESA.

[Screen reads: Criteria for examining the Individual Project: Scriptwriting

For the Individual Project: Scriptwriting, a mark out of 10 is awarded for each of the three criteria, giving a total mark out of 30.

Criterion 1: Concept (10 marks)

* originality, clarity and sustained theatrical concept
* stylistic and thematic coherence of the script
* structural cohesion.

Criterion 2: Dramatic action (10 marks)

* effective choice and shaping of dramatic and theatrical elements
* development of clear and purposeful dramatic action
* effectiveness in engaging the audience.

Criterion 3: Dramatic language (10 marks)

* use of language effectively to create characters and relationships
* use of language effectively to describe visual and/or aural imagery and effects appropriate to the stylistic demands of the play
* use of language to create sub textual, symbolic and thematic meaning.

Remembering that you are writing a script that is going to be marked, it is really important to understand the marking criteria. Depending on what stage of writing the play you are at, you can use this advice to enhance and improve your final draft before submission, or you can use it as a way of guiding your writing practice from the start. Here is the marking criteria for scriptwriting. This can also be found on the HSC drama section of the NESA website.

[Slide reads: Criterion 1-concept, 10 marks

* Originality, clarity and sustained theatrical concept
* Stylistic and thematic coherence of the script
* Structural cohesion]

Let's start by looking at criterion one, concept. This makes up 10 marks out of 30 for the project. The first dot point in this criterion is originality, clarity and sustained theatrical concept. What this means is that your script should say something. It should be based on an idea that you have developed because you are passionate about saying it. This is what is at the heart of the idea of originality. Students often worry that they can't create an idea that no one else has thought of before that is totally original and unique. Sometimes this can be a big concern for students, but the most important thing is to remember that if you are writing about a topic you're passionate about, and you are saying something about that topic, then it is original because it is what you believe.

It also doesn't matter what you write about. There is nothing in the criteria that says the concept you're writing about has to be on a particular topic. Whether it is politics, human behaviour, a particular hobby, human relationships, sport or art, it doesn't matter. Find a topic that you care about so you can write with passion about the subject. Then it is important to make sure that you are making a statement about the topic you have chosen. Don't just write about a particular topic, say something about that topic. It is okay to write a play with a general threat theme is love, but it is even stronger to communicate something more specific, like, love cannot exist when there is hatred between two families. By defining this message, you are creating your theatrical concept. Remember that this is a 15 minute play. So it really isn't possible to deal with more than one message. Clarify this message, narrow it down so it creates one focus for the script. Once you have this concept, you can structure your script so that all the characters and events and dialogue in the script are used to communicate that concept and it will be sustained throughout the script.

Here's an activity. For those students who are towards the end of their writing process, have someone read the script. Make sure it is someone you haven't spoken to about it, and definitely someone who hasn't read an earlier draft. Once they have finished reading it, ask them to write an answer to the following questions. What is the topic I'm exploring in my play? Does this seem to be one clear message in my play? If yes, what is the message of the play? If no, what are the different messages that are being communicated? Now it's time to look at your script again, and if you haven't communicated one clear message to your reader, it might be necessary to make some edits, and change the events and dialogue so that you really focus in on that one idea.

For those who are at the beginning of the writing process, here's an activity for you. Write a list of all the things that make you happy, make you mad, things that you find ridiculous, things that you care about the most in the world. When you feel passionately about something, you will write better about it. Now the next thing to do is make your idea more specific. Here's an example. I want to write a script about the environment. Now that is a big topic and this is a short script. So to avoid writing a script that is general and tries to deal with too much, I need to break down that general topic and create a more specific targeted message. I have a great passion for the ocean, so I'm still going to focus my message on the environment, but specifically, I want to look at environmental concerns to do with the ocean. Now even that is a huge concept to deal with given that there are environmental issues to do with rising sea levels, corporations dumping toxic waste in the ocean, the list goes on. I have noticed that my favourite beach lately has had increasing numbers of plastic bottles being left in the sand. Not a huge number, but enough that I've noticed, and it makes me mad that people think that their small actions don't have big consequences.

So because of this personal connection to this very specific concern about this aspect of environmental issues, it is perfect for me to write about as it is specific and targeted, and I am passionate about it. So I can create an original message as it comes from my experiences and my concerns. So the topic of my play will be the pollution of the ocean. And the message of my play would be that people keep making small bad choices in their everyday lives that have a huge impact on the health of the ocean. Now it's your turn, choose a topic, think about how that topic connects to you personally. What is the message that you want to tell the world about the topic? Once you have your message, you can make all your script decisions based on this message. This will help keep your script focused and have purpose.

So the next part of this first criteria refers to the stylistic coherence of the script. It is really important when you're writing a script that you make a choice in the style that you are writing in. There are so many different styles of theatre and sometimes playwrights will mix styles. This is all fine, but make sure you make a choice, rather than just writing in a generic way that is sort of realism, but not really strictly adhering to the conventions of realism. In saying that, it doesn't matter what style or styles you choose to write in, as long as you've made a choice, and you stick to it.

[Screen reads: Theatrical styles

* Realism
* Naturalism
* Absurdism
* Black comedy
* Expressionism
* Epic theatre
* Postmodern
* Verbatim theatre
* Farce
* Meta-theatre
* Morality play
* Site-specific theatre
* Theatre of cruelty
* Tragedy
* Physical theatre
* Spectacle
* Melodrama]

Look at the list provided. These are all different theatrical styles. For those who are towards the end of the script writing process, when you look at this list, can you see the style that you've been writing in? Can you name a style that you have written your script in? Or is your script a mix of a number of these? Reflecting on this is important as you need to be in control of the theatre you are making and using the right style to communicate your message effectively. If you can't name the style you're working with, it might be worth researching these styles and seeing if any of the conventions would help enhance your message even more effectively, and make some changes that can showcase your understanding of theatrical forms. It will also mean that you have stylistic coherence in the script. For those who are starting the process of script writing, make sure you spend time researching these forms so you can choose one, or meld a couple of them so that it helps enhance the message of what you are writing.

Let's use my script idea as an example. So let's recap my idea. It is, people keep making small bad choices in their everyday lives, that have a huge impact on the health of the ocean. Now I want to find the right style to use in order to enhance the message of the story. Firstly, I know that I want to write using a more comedic style rather than a serious tone, because I feel more confident using that style, and I think that comedy can also be used to make people reflect on serious issues. Point out how ridiculous it is that people continue to make choices that they think are insignificant and that have a huge impact on the environment in the long run. After doing some research, I decided that I'll use elements of absurdism for my script, as one of the features of absurdism, is that it uses cyclical structure where the problems that are presented at the start of the play are not resolved and there is no growth in the characters or the problems. In my script, I know that I want the choices that the characters make at the start to be the same ones that they make at the end, while they are all oblivious to the destruction of the natural beauty around them. The reason why this is a good style for my message is that it supports the idea that people don't change their ways, and how ridiculous this is as these choices are ruining the environment.

Now it's your turn. For those who are already partway through the process, think about the choices you have made in terms of the style. Is it a comedy? Is it a tragedy? Is it realism? Is it a more exaggerated style? And how do these choices support the message of the play? For those who have just started, think carefully about the message and spend time making choices that are going to enhance that message.

Once you have this choice made, you can shape your storyline that is structured based on the form you have chosen. You should not start writing your script until you know exactly what happens. You need to know where the story is going and how it will end before you start. Without taking time with this step, you can write a script that feels a little directionless. For those who have written drafts of their script already, go back and check that from the start of the play the story stays on track and makes sense. It is a really good idea to get someone to read your play at this point, and make sure it is someone who hasn't read an earlier draft. Ask them to retell you the story to check that it has made sense to them. For those who are starting, take a long time developing a detailed plan of the events of the play story, so that once you start, you can know where you're heading. In spending time thinking deeply about the message, the style you will write in, and then the narrative, you will be well set up to effectively meet the first marking criterion concept.

[Slide reads: Criterion 2-Dramatic action, 10 marks

* effective choice and shaping of dramatic and theatrical elements
* Development of clear and purposeful dramatic action
* Effectiveness in engaging the audience]

Let's look at the second criteria, dramatic action. Now if you've planned effectively, you should already have good control over creating clear and purposeful action, as you will have thought carefully about the narrative. However, a major part of meeting these criteria is about understanding that you are writing for the stage and a live audience.

Let's look at a sample of a script draft that I have written. Lights up, a car comes racing down the road. It swerves across the road as the tires start to screech. The car loses control and hits a telegraph pole. The scene fades. Lights up on an average school corridor. Meg and Gina walk down the corridor, and as they walk they whisper and laugh with each other. Meg, excitedly, "Did you hear about the accident?" Gina thinks about what Meg has said and remembers that her mum had told her that she shouldn't gossip about serious things. Gina, seriously, "I don't know if we should be talking about that."

This script is based on an idea for a play, which would be about the potential consequences of young people taking dangerous risks. When we look at this script sample, the script probably isn't that effective in controlling the dramatic action for the stage. Let's look closely and figure out why.

Let's start with the first stage direction. ‘Lights up, a car comes racing down the road. It swerves around the corner as the tires start to screech. It loses control and hits a telegraph pole, the scene fades.’ This is really action that can't happen on a stage. While staging can be complicated and have some tricky effects, it would not be possible to have a car driving a great distance and then crash into a telegraph pole on the stage. Let's look at the next direction. ‘Lights up on an average school corridor. Meg and Gina walk down the corridor, and as they walk, they whisper and laugh with each other.’ Now of course the play can be set in a school, but to have continuous movement along a long corridor, which is a confined space would be difficult. Where would the audience placed in this situation? The overall problem with these stage directions is that they are probably written more for film rather than a staged theatrical play. It is really important that if you have already written drafts for your script, that before you submit it, you spend time checking the action within your script to make sure it is controlled to happen on the stage.

Do the following activity. Before you reach your final draft, close your eyes and imagine the stage your play is written for. What does it look like? Look at every corner of the stage. What does the set look like? Where are the entrances and exits for the actors? Now imagine the lights come up on the stage to start the play. What is the first thing the audience sees? Are the actors on the stage or do they enter onto the lit stage? Where do they enter from? Where are they when they deliver their first line? Keep going through your script and examine all the action that happens on the stage in this way, then make changes to your script that reflect your understanding that all of this action needs to happen on the stage. By doing this, you will be in control of the stage action.

So after my reflection, I would realise that my script needed some work to be more effective in shaping the onstage action. I still want my script to have the same content, but I need to rewrite the action to set the stage. This is really important for you to remember as you revise your use of dramatic action. You don't need to change your script ideas just control them effectively. I would think about all of the elements of drama and the elements of production in order to shape the experience for my live audience.

So, I have edited my script to use sound and lighting to establish the tension I want to have at the start of the play. ‘The stage is in darkness apart from a small light coming from the back of the stage. The light gets brighter and brighter, almost blinding the audience. This is accompanied by the sound of a car that grows louder and louder, culminating in the sound of screeching tires followed by a loud crash. The lights cut out and the stage is plunged back into darkness.’ Next I need to control the action in the playground. This is how I have rewritten that. ‘The lights come up downstage left, there is a typical metal bench that you would see in a school playground. Meg and Gina sit playing cards.’ I wanted to try and avoid just having the two characters sitting and chatting, as this can be boring for the audience. So I decided to give them an action that can be controlled on the stage, but it isn't too exaggerated as this wouldn't suit my chosen style of heightened realism. I decided to have the students playing cards, as this is also a good symbol of the idea of taking risks and chance, which is what my play is all about.

The next problem with my original script, is the character's emotional direction. To recap, this is what the direction is. ‘Gina thinks about what Meg has said and remembers that her mum had told her that she shouldn't gossip about serious things’. The problem with this stage direction is that it communicates something that the audience can never see as it's a thought. So, I need to think about how I can show the audience what the character's feeling through her actions, rather than just writing that that is what she feels. So, I've reworked it like this. ‘Gina shifts in her seat and turns away from Meg. She is clearly uncomfortable. She pauses, hesitantly before responding to Meg’. This might not communicate information about what she learned from her mum, but it communicates her discomfort in discussing the accident in such a light-hearted way.

So, here's my edited draft, which is much better in controlling the dramatic action of the script. ‘The stage is in darkness apart from a small light coming from the back of the stage. The light gets brighter and brighter, almost blinding the audience. This is accompanied by the sound effect of a car that grows louder and louder, culminating in the sound of screeching tires followed by a loud crash. The light cuts out and the stage is plunged back into darkness. The lights come up downstage left, there is a typical metal bench that you would see in a school playground. Meg and Gina sit playing cards. Meg, excitedly, "Did you hear about the accident?" Gina shifts in her seat and turns away from Meg. She is clearly uncomfortable. She pauses hesitantly before responding to Meg. Gina, seriously, "I don't know if we should be talking about that."’

[Slide reads: Criterion 3-Dramatic language, 10 marks

* Use of language effectively to create characters and relationships
* Use of language effectively to describe visual and/or aural imagery and effects appropriate to the stylistic demands of the play
* Use of language to create sub-textual, symbolic and thematic meaning.]

Now let's move on to our last criterion, dramatic language. This criterion is all about the words you choose in order to create the characters and the world of the play. Let's firstly think about how the choice of language you use is vital in creating the characters that we include in our plays. Each person has a unique way of speaking and the words we choose to use in our speech, tells the world a lot about who we are as a person. When you write for a character, you have to make sure that the language they use is appropriate for the character they are. Let's firstly think about how the choice of language we use is vital in creating the characters that we include in our plays. Each person has a unique way of speaking and the words we choose to use in our speech, tells the world a lot about who we are as a person. When you write for a character, you have to make sure that the language they use is appropriate for the character that they are.

Try this exercise. I have created three different basic character outlines. Imagine that each character is at the dinner table with their families, and they are annoyed after a hard day. How would they ask for someone to pass them the salt? Notice that each character would say this slightly differently. ‘Character one, a 52-year-old woman who is an accountant and has three teenage children. Character two, a 37-year-old man, who runs his own plumbing business and has two small kids. Character three, a 16-year-old boy who has been at football training and hasn't eaten since lunch.’

Choosing the language, the character uses is called creating a character's voice and each separate character should sound unique. So, thinking about what you did in the last exercise, hopefully you thought carefully about the words the characters use, because as a script writer, we want to communicate more to our audience about each character than just their desire to have some salt. Choosing the language, the character uses is called creating a character's voice. And each separate character should sound unique. You need to shape the unique way that a character speaks. This is made up by the language that a character uses, including slang, the way they address others, if they talk a lot or a little, if they swear, if they are very formal in the way they speak. All of this communicates information about the character's background, beliefs, attitudes, and so much more. So, in thinking about what you did in the last exercise, hopefully you thought carefully about the words the characters use, because as a script writer, we want to communicate more to our audience about each of those characters than just their desire to have some salt.

Depending on where you are in the writing process, you need to make sure you know who the characters are in order to make sure that their dialogue sounds like them. If you have already written drafts of your script, spend some time writing a little summary of each character. Who are they? What are their personality traits? I provided a long list of adjectives which include, calm, ignorant, secretive, polite, easygoing, loving, talkative, witty. Find descriptive words to suit your character. Once you've done this, go to your script and read every line that they say and say it out loud. Does each line sound like that type of person? If you do this for every character in your play, you'll be well on your way to controlling your characters voices. For those students at the start of the process, create a list of traits for each of the characters you are creating, then try writing or speaking as the characters. Don't worry too much about what they're talking about, because at this stage, you should just be focusing on developing how they speak.

Once you have created and controlled the individual voices, it is also really important to control the language the characters use to show the relationship between the two characters. We all have specific ways of talking to the different people in our lives, depending on the relationships we have with those people. Here's some dialogue that I've developed. As you listen, write down everything that you learn about each of the characters from this exchange.

‘A, getting annoyed. "Come on, I want to make my own choices." B, sarcastically, "Well, haven't those choices been great so far?" A, taking a breath, "Look, I know I've made mistakes, but I can look after myself, you know." B, "And I suppose you think you can just come back here anytime you want and I'll wash your clothes and make you dinner and..." A, interrupting, "No, I can do all that stuff." B, quietly, "So you don't need me anymore, that's what you're saying?" A, "Come on, don't be like that. You're the one that taught me how to look after myself. Isn't it time I went and tried?" B, "No, it's too soon, you're still my little chicken." A, laughing, "I'm bigger than you." Look, I gotta go and meet the guys, but we'll talk in the morning, okay?" B, quietly, "Yep, okay." A, picks up his keys and goes to walk to the door. B, quickly remembering, "Be careful driving." Quietly, "It's been raining." A, calling from inside the hallway. "I'm always careful."’

So hopefully just from the language they use as well as some of the content in the dialogue, you've picked up that the script was exploring a parent-child relationship, and that the parent was upset because the child wants to move out of home. Now imagine you're writing the next scene, the language the child uses with their friends will be different because we use different language when we talk to different people. Make sure that once you have written any dialogue, you go back and check that the language used by the characters suits the relationships that they have. Think, who are the people? What are their relationships? What is the situation? Does the language the characters use suit the relationship that they have with the other person?

The next part about understanding this marking criterion is understanding that we need to control the language we use to create the mood and atmosphere of the world of the play. Listen to the following script. ‘Lights up on a room. A standing looking at something on a table. B enters and walks to A. B, "What are you doing?" A, "I'm busy." B, "With what?" A, "I'm trying to fix this." B, "Can I help?" A, "I don't know if you can."’

In this script, it's very hard to understand what the feeling of this scene is. So, we need to use language more appropriately to describe the scene more effectively. Now, let's imagine that we want to create a play that is about the breaking down of a romantic relationship, and we want to create tension in the scene. I have used descriptive language to rewrite the scene where now there is more going on than just the simple exchange of words between the two characters.

‘Lights up on a living room. The walls are covered in framed photos of A and B at various parties, family gatherings, and in different holiday destinations over a number of years. These are pictures of our happy past. There are a few empty hooks on the wall where some of the photos have been removed. There are packing boxes and newspapers strewn about the living room. A is standing at the dining room table centre stage looking down at a photo. The frame that was in has broken. B enters and stands in the doorway and looks at A. B hangs their head before slowly walking to A. B pleading, "What are you doing?" A, quickly brushes a tear away and grabs some glue from the table. Defiantly, "I'm busy." B, disbelieving, "With what?" A, annoyed. "I'm trying to fix this." B, gently. "Can I help?" A drops the frame and glue to the table and sighs. A fighting back tears. "I don't know if you can."

Just by using symbolic and descriptive language, you can effectively shape the mood of the scene. If you have written drafts of your script, go back and look at it again and check that the language you have used is effective in creating the mood and atmosphere of the play. If you're just starting out, you should be very clear in identifying the atmosphere of each scene and use language appropriately to create this.

[Slide shows a pie graph depicting ‘how we communicate’. Body language is a little more than half, another third is tone of voice and the remaining segment represents what we say]

The last way to control language in script writing is by playing with subtext. Subtext is a hidden or unspoken message communicated by a character. Very often when we speak, it is not necessarily the words we say that communicates what we mean, but rather our body language and the tone we use that communicates what we really mean. Think about this simple example. Look at the very basic dialogue in example one.

‘ X, "I'm fine."’ If we take the meaning just from these words, we would understand that the character is feeling okay. However, we can change what is communicated just by adding action and emotion to create a subtext. Listen to examples two, three, four and five to see how descriptive language can add much more information about our characters, even when the dialogue is quite simple. ‘X crosses her arms and turns away. X sternly, "I'm fine."’. ‘X runs her hand through her hair and sighs. X wearily, "I'm fine."’ ‘X hugs Z warmly. X convincing her, "I'm fine."’ ‘X tenses her fist and grits her teeth. X shouting, "I'm fine."’

It is really important to think about how you communicate to the audience, what the characters are thinking and feeling. And a great old rule to remember, is show your audience don't tell them. Here's an example of telling the audience what a character thinks. ‘Lights up on an ordinary family home. A is at the sink washing vegetables to prepare the evening meal. A door is heard closing and B enters. A, "Hey, honey" B, "Hi mum, I'm home. I'm so tired this afternoon and I've had a really bad day because I had a fight with my best friend and I'm really annoyed because she has hurt my feelings and I really just need a hug from you."’

This is not the most effective script writing because it tells the audience too much and it feels very unnatural for a person to talk like this. So good script writing will try to use language effectively to show the audience what the characters are feeling.

So, here's that dialogue rewritten. ‘Lights up on an ordinary family home. A is at the sink washing vegetables to prepare the evening meal. A door slam is heard which makes A jump. Stamping footsteps are heard coming back towards the kitchen. B stomps in, throws her school bag on the ground and slumps into a seat, resting her head on the dining room table. A, "Hey honey." B doesn't respond. A repeating, "Hey honey." B grunts, "Hey." A, fishing, "Good day at school?" B, muffled, "It was, it was." Fighting back tears, "Mia said, and then Sarah told." B erupts into sobs. A comes over and puts her arms around B. "Oh honey, I'm sure everything will be okay."

You'll notice in this the dialogue has actually been cut right back because sometimes it is what is not said that communicates what a character is feeling most effectively to an audience. If you're towards the end of your writing process, or at the beginning, make sure that you are using language effectively to show the audience what is happening. Use descriptive and symbolic language and you will be well placed to make the third marking criterion, dramatic language.

[Screen reads

* Ensure that you plan and control what you are communicating to the audience
  + Clear message
  + Choose a style
  + Control the narrative
* Make sure you are writing a script for the stage
  + Think about how the play works on a stage
  + Remember that this is for a live audience
* Control the action
  + Think carefully about what is happening on the stage so it is interesting to watch
  + Control where every action is happening on the stage
  + Think about what every actor is doing on the stage throughout the play
* Control the language within your script to keep it engaging
  + Create character voices
  + Create clear relationships through the language characters use with each other
  + Use descriptive language
  + Use subtext
  + Show don’t tell
* Have fun and be creative]

End of Transcript