Ten Line Scene[[1]](#footnote-0)

Tags: speaking, writing, improv, long exercise

Type: Small groups

Time: 20+ minutes

## **Why are we doing this?**

This exercise trains playwriting, improvisation, and dramatic structure. It forces us to be flexible and to work off one another’s ideas.

## **What materials/set-up do I need to prepare?**

Halo & Reynolds recommend 90 minutes to 2 hours for this exercise, depending on how much discussion and rerunning of scenes you would like to do. You can also cut this up into several lessons if needed. You need plenty of space for this exercise and a part of the classroom as a stage for the students to perform. You need to provide pencils and paper to write on or have your students write their scenes on their computers.

## **How do we do this?**

“In the triangle improvisation [three actors, A+B set up situation, C enters and results in a moment of tension then cut dialogue into five lines] what becomes essential to its success are the restrictions placed upon the material. This next exercise continues with the idea of restriction from the outset. It is an effective exercise that explores issues of play-writing, dramatic structure, staging and acting.”

**Part 1: writers and actors**

Divide into groups of three. Ask them to elect to be a writer, and two actors.

i) Give the writer a pencil and a piece of paper. On the piece of paper, as the facilitator, you have already written the first line of dialogue; for example: “it was an extraordinary thing to happen.” The writer’s job is then to go off on their own and write the next nine lines of dialogue for two characters, to make a ten-line dialogue that starts with the line you’ve given. All the writers have to start with the same first line of dialogue. It is important that you put the writers under pressure, that they have to write instantly off hte top of their heads, so that very quickly they end up with a completed ten-line dialogue for two actors. It should take them no more than five to seven minutes.

ii) Meanwhile, give out pencils and paper to the two actors, who have to invent between them two locations, one exterior and one interior, e.g. a boat on a lake and a café. They write each a location on a separate piece of paper, which you collect.

**Part 2: first staging**

i) reunite the writers with their actors. Ask the writer to cast the two actors as characters A and B in the ten-line dialogue, and get them to read it through once.

ii) As the facilitator, you now shuffle up the bits of paper containing the locations, and give one location to each group. Making sure it is not one that they themselves wrote down. The task is now to stage their ten-line dialogue quickly in the given location. So the actors will be faced with ten lines of which the meaning may not be completely clear, and suddenly have to deliver it in a “motorway servie station” or while “windsurfing”. At no time can any of the ten-line dialogue be altered; it has to remain as it was written on the page.

Speed is of the essence, and it is surprising what creative choices can be made by the juxtaposition of the dialogue with a random location.

iii) encourage the groups to present their work, even though they will not feel they have had enough time to rehearse. See all the work and ask the audience where they think each scene is located? Draw out comments as to how the location affected the content and delivery of the dialogue.

**Part 3: second staging**

i) give each group a piece of paper with a second location on it. They will now stage the ten-line dialogue again in the new, completely different locations.

The staging was intentionally quick in order to see what creative choices were made under the pressure to produce something. Draw out from the group which elements of the process could be given more consideration with the time allowing.

Space: Decide how to use the space and where to stage the performance in the room. Consider perhaps using some feature of the room to help suggest the location, such as a pillar for a “medieval dungeon” or the edge of the stage (or a sweater laid down on the floor) to suggest “a riverbank”. Where will the audience watch from and what is their spatial relationship with the actors?

Set: They can use a limited amount of whatever is immediately available to help suggest location, e.g. charis put together and a broom handle to hang on to suggest a “ride at the fun fair”

Props: They can have a maximum of three prope to help them e.g. two bags and a magazine to suggest the “airport departure longue”.

Costume: One piece of costume each from whatever is immediately available e.g. a t-shirt thrown over the head to suggest “a sauna”.

Subtext: They can use the time to explore with their writer what the relationship is between the characters, and how that is affected by the specific location. They can also learn the lines.

Sound: the writer can provide off-stage sound effects, if they are wanted, e.g. the announcements for “the railway station”

ii) Allow ten to fifteen minutes for the groups to rehearse these scenes. This will give them time to break the scene down in detail and put it back together.

iii) See all the work, moving the audience around the space as required by the different scenes. Again ask the audience where they think the scene is located and how it affected the choices made.

Example: the content of the dialogue ceenters around one character’s mother and her drunken behavior at a party. First staged in “a boxing ring” the scene is plated with energy and the dialogue is virtually spat across the actors. The scene becomes full of aggression, frustration and furious resentment.

The second scene happens at “a garden party”. The scene was suggested by a table covered with a shirt to imply a table cloth, two chairs and the writer off-stage clinking a mug with a spoon and mumbling to imply the other guests. The two actors sit primly in the chairs with their legs crossed, looking into the middle distance. This staging conjures up the image of a posh garden party in the gardens of a large country house. The audience was spread around the room in clusters to suggest the other guests. The dialogue is then delivered with extreme discretion and understatement, so as not to draw the attention of fellow guests to the scandal being discussed.

The exercise tells us a great deal about the work of the actor, who has to work hard to make the dialogue fit into the given location, in doing which each word has to be justified and based in some experience. This exercise provides a good exploration of dramatic language and structure. It encourages the participants to examine the content and staging of a scene”.

1. **Source:** Hahlo, R., & Reynolds, P. (2000). *Dramatic events: How to run a successful workshop.* St. Martin's Griffin. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)