

One-act play Summary

A **one-act play** is a [play](#) that has only one [act](#), as distinct from plays that occur over several acts. One-act plays may consist of one or more [scenes](#). In recent years,^[when?] the 10-minute play has emerged as a popular [subgenre](#) of the one-act play, especially in writing competitions. The origin of the one-act play may be traced to the very beginning of [drama](#): in [ancient Greece](#), *Cyclops*, a [satyr play](#) by [Euripides](#), is an early example.

One-Act plays were written & staged throughout the 18th & 19th centuries as “The Curtain Raisers” or “The After Pieces”.

They were chiefly farcical & served to amuse the audience before the commencement of the actual drama or were staged for their amusement just after it had come to an end.

The famous one-act play “Monkey’s Paw” was first staged as a ‘Curtain Raiser’ & it proved to be more entertaining than the main drama. It may be said to mark the beginning of the modern one-act play.

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It was great Norwegian dramatist Ibsen, who, for the first time, introduced the minute stage-directions into the one-act play. Before him, one-act plays were written in poetry, but he made prose the medium of his one-act plays. In short, he made the drama, simple & real & brought it nearer to everyday life. He made the modern one-act play what it is & his example has been widely followed. George Bernard Shaw & John Galsworthy are two of his greatest followers.

The one-act play requires no elaborate setting & costumes, & so comes in handy to be staged in amateur dramatic societies & clubs.

One-act plays by major dramatists —

- (i) Anton Chekhov — A Marriage Proposal (1890)
- (ii) August Strindberg — Pariah (1889)
 - Motherly Love (1892)
 - The First Warning (1892)
- (iii) Thornton Wilder — The Long Christmas Dinner (1931)
- (iv) Eugene Ionesco — The Bald Soprano (1950)
- (v) Arthur Miller — A Memory of Two Mondays (1955)
- (vi) Samuel Beckett — Krapp's Last Tape (1958)
- (vii) Israel Horovitz — Line (1974)
- (viii) Edward Albee — The Goat, or Who is Sylvia? (2002)

Chief Characteristics

- (i) One-act play is a play that has only one act, but may consist of one or more scenes.
- (ii) One-act plays are usually written in a concise manner.
- (iii) It deals with a single dominant situation, & aims at producing a single effect.
- (iv) It deals with only one theme developed through one situation to one climax in order to produce the maximum of effect.
- (v) It treats the problems of everyday life as marriage, punishment for crimes, labour conditions, divorce, etc.
- (vi) The one-act play, like the longer drama, should have a beginning, a middle & an end.

It may be divided into four stages: The Exposition, The Conflict, The Climax & The Denouement.

The exposition is usually brief, serves as an introduction to the play.

It is through the conflict that the action of the drama develops. It is the very backbone of the one-act play.

Climax is the turning point of the drama. It is an important part of the one-act play & constitutes its moment of supreme interest.

The Denouement is very brief & often overlapping with climax.

- (vii) Action begins right at the start of the play.
- (viii) There are no breaks in the action, that is, it is continuous since it's a short play; no intervals.
- (ix) Everything superfluous is to be strictly avoided as the play is short & the action takes place within a short period of time. It introduces elaborate stage directions to minimize the time taken by the action itself.
- (x) The creation of mood, or atmosphere is indispensable to its success.
- (xi) There are three dramatic unities which are observed in the one-act play. The unities are — the unity of time, unity of place & the unity of action.
- (xii) It aims at simplicity of plot; concentration of action & unity of impression. It does not rely on spectacular effects & common dramatic tricks of old.
- (xiii) The characters in a one-act play are limited in number. Generally, there are not more than two or three principal characters.
- (xiv) There is no full development of character. All the different aspects of a character are not presented. The attention is focused on only one or two salient aspects of character & they are brought out by placing the characters in different situations & circumstances. The author implies the past & intimates the future of a character by presenting a crucial moment in the life of that character.
- (xv) There is an influence of realism. The characters in the modern one-act play are ordinary men & women. It depicts characters that seems to be real & related to everyday life.
- (xvi) It must present a question, for which the audience eagerly awaits the answer.
- (xvii) Its language is simple & can be followed without any strain. All superfluity is to be avoided in the dialogue. The dialogue must be purposeful; the best dialogue is that which does several things at one time. Every word is to be carefully chosen & sentences

must be compact & condensed. Effort should be made to say, whatever is to be said, in the least possible words. Thus, the language of the dialogue should be simple, brief & easy to understand. Long speeches & arguments & long sentences would be out of place & would lessen the charm & interest of the play.