The `modern-play` template

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`modern-play` is a simple, free template for conveniently formatting plays in a way consistent with the Dramatists Guild modern play format.[1] Versions are available for both MSWord and LibreOffice. Though lacking many conveniences provided by commercial programs like FinalDraft, it automates most formatting decisions and can be learned in the few minutes it takes to read this document. A trivial piece of programming, it can't be plausibly claimed as "my IP"; so you're welcome to do with it what you like.

The font used throughout a `modern-play` document is Times New Roman, and all margins are set to one inch. (See the chat about reconfiguration in the section on tips and tricks.)

The basic idea

In a Word (or LibreOffice) document, every unit of text has a *style* that specifies how it is to be displayed. `modern-play` specifies, for example, that: text in style Dialogue is flush left; text in style CharacterTag is centered and all caps; and the left margin of text in style StageDirection is the middle of the page.

Here's a simple example. Text that should be assigned style CharacterTag is shown in red, StageDirection in blue, Parenthetical green, and Dialogue in black.

== begin

<div align="center">HAM</div>

Good morning, mom.

<div align="center">GERT</div>

Good morning, son.

<div align="center">HAM</div>

Where's dad?

<div align="center">GERT</div>

I've been meaning to tell you.

<div align="center">HAM reaches for his sword</div>

<div align="center">HAM
(Angrily)</div>

Careful.

== end

There are two ways[2] in which text that you enter gets a style:

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1. That format does not specify every formatting detail.
2. Strictly speaking, there's a third way: a `modern-play` document comes with a few pieces of placeholder text, whose style is inherited when you replace it.

By selecting its style from a menu. That assigns the style to the "unit of text" in which the cursor resides. So far as styles are concerned a unit of text is essentially, a region bounded by carriage returns.

By an automatic "flow rule". A flow rule has the form: If text in style A is followed by a carriage return, the text that begins on the next line will be in style B. I'll write such a flow rule rule as A → B. From now on I'll write "carriage return" (i.e., "Enter") as "[CR]".

The rules that get the biggest workout are

> CharacterTag → Dialogue
> Dialogue → CharacterTag

Suppose we start typing the dialogue above in the style CharacterTag. (Set aside, for now, the question of how we got there.)
- Typing "ham" will display "HAM" in the CharacterTag style, centered and all caps.
- [CR] moves to the next line and shifts to style Dialogue (by CharacterTag → Dialogue).
- Typing "Good morning, mom" will display the text in the Dialogue style, flush left.
- [CR] moves to the next line and shifts to style CharacterTag (by Dialogue → CharacterTag).
- Type "ham"
- [CR] moves to the next line and shifts to style CharacterTag.

Etc., for a while.

In this way the first four lines of dialogue (the first eight lines of text) are entered just by typing that text with interspersed [CR]. Correct formatting is automatic. One further maneuver is needed when the style introduced by a flow rule is not the one you want.

- After the line "I've been meaning to tell you." [CR] moves to the next line and shifts to style CharacterTag; but we want a stage direction, not a character tag. To correct that, do the following, in either order: type "Hamlet reaches for his sword" and select style StageDirection.
- [CR] moves to the next line and, by the rule StageDirection → CharacterTag, shifts to style CharacterTag.
- Type "ham"
- [CR] moves down a line and shifts to style Dialogue, but we want a parenthetical.
- In either order, type "(Angrily)" and select style Parenthetical.[3]
- [CR] moves to the next lined and shifts to style Dialogue by the rule Parenthetical → Dialogue.

Etc.

And that, essentially, is it. In a typical script, the style of the current text unit almost always determines the style of the next one, in which case the flow rule automatically does the right thing. As a result, typing a script is quite efficient. On the infrequent occasions when you want a different style, you select it.

IMPORTANT: You may wish to insert line breaks in dialogue (or a stage direction or scenario). For

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3   A parenthetical remark should be surrounded by parentheses. `modern-play` isn't smart enough to supply them automatically, so you have to type them yourself.

example, the dialogue may consist of lines of poetry, but adding a line break with [CR] would put the next line in a different style. To get a line break without changing the style, use shift-[CR] instead. (You could get pretty much the same result by using [CR] and then changing the style of the new line by selection, but that way lies madness.)

The structure of a `modern-play` document

The first two pages of a `modern-play` script are front matter: a title page and a page that typically contains a list of characters and a description of the setting. Pages of front matter are unnumbered. Some submission opportunities require that front matter contain additional information—e.g., a synopsis. To accommodate that variability, sections of the front matter pages will consist of blank lines in which additional text can be entered with style Vanilla. Using Vanilla is like using a typewriter that wraps lines: [CR] begins a new line flush left; vertical spaces are added by repeating [CR]; horizontal spaces may be added with tabs or the space bar. [CR] won't change the style, so the flow rule is Vanilla → Vanilla.

The remaining pages contain the script proper, numbered beginning with 1.

Title page

The title page you see on opening a document created from the `modern-play` template will look something like this, where the yellow blocks indicate blank space in style Vanilla.

[TitleStuff]

[ContactInfo]

"[TitleStuff]" is placeholder text in style TitleStuff. To add title information, such as

Speed Mating
A 10-minute comedy
By David Guaspari

replace the placeholder and type those lines with a [CR] after all but the last.

"[ContactInfo]" is a placeholder in style ContactInfo. Delete the placeholder text and, if you wish, add contact information such as

<div align="right">

dguaspari@gmail.com
https://dguaspari.com
…
</div>

replace it and type those lines, adding a [CR] after all but the last.

To include a synopsis on the title page (or the number of your bank account, or your blood type, or whatever else may be asked for) add text as you see fit in the Vanilla space between the title and contact information.

IMPORTANT: The result of replacing the placeholders and/or adding extra information may exceed a single page. Correct that by deleting blank lines from one or more of the Vanilla spaces. (NOTE: A page break has been inserted at the bottom of the title page; if you accidentally delete that, you should reinsert it.)

Page two

This page is entirely Vanilla. The words "CHARACTERS" and "SETTING" are included, since you probably want them, but they can be deleted or modified as you see fit. This Vanilla section also ends with an explicit page break.

The script proper

All that's initially shown of the script proper is this:

<div align="center">
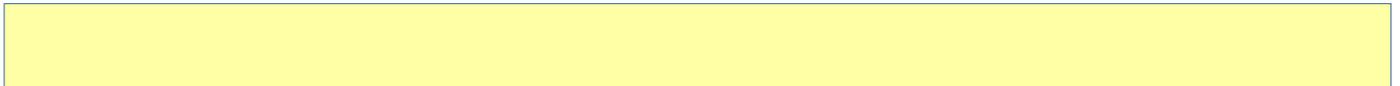
Act I
Scene 1
</div>

As before, the yellow box indicates Vanilla space you are free to adjust. The flow rules are

Act → Scenario
Scene → Scenario
Scenario → CharacterTag

So, if you want to include a scenario for Act I place the cursor at the end of the line and hit [CR], which will yield

<div align="center">

Act I

… add Act 1 scenario here …

Scene 1
</div>

If Scene 1 has a scenario of its own, place the cursor at the end of the line and hit [CR]. If Act 1 has only a single scene, delete "Scene 1".

How to handle other possibilities will now, I hope, be obvious. E.g., for a one-act play with a scenario and only a single scene, do a [CR] after "Scene 1" (to get a scenario), then delete both "Act 1" and "Scene 1".

List of styles and rules

All the styles have been mentioned. Here they are, grouped by how they're used, with the rules:

The key elements of dialogue:

> CharacterTag → Dialogue
> Dialogue → CharacterTag
> Parenthetical → Dialogue
> StageDirection → CharacterTag

Beginning an act or scene:

> Act → Scenario
> Scene → Scenario
> Scenario → CharacterTag

Boilerplate and fussing:

> TitleStuff → TitleStuff
> ContactInfo → ContactInfo
> Vanilla → Vanilla

If you somehow find yourself using the wrong style element, you can always correct that by selecting the right one from the menu.

Tips and tricks

Contact information. You'll want to customize the template to contain your specific contact information. Open it, add the contact information, and then do a "Save As" that saves it *as a template* (with an appropriate name). Any script you produce from that customized template can of course be made blind by deleting the contact information.

Managing page breaks. That's mostly up to you. If, for example, a speech of ham breaks across a page, it's up to you to begin the next page with a character tag like "HAM (CONTD.)". It's also up to you to start each new act on a new page. One sensible thing that `modern-play` will do is prevent a page break immediately after any of the following styles: CharacterTag, Parenthetical, Scene. Sensible practice is to defer all worry about page breaks until you are preparing a version that will be launched into the world. Use a final pass to fix any bad page breaks.

Numbering acts and scenes. That's entirely up to you. More sophisticated formatters will insert act and scene numbers automatically and will correctly renumber scenes or acts that have been reordered. Not `modern-play`.

Reconfiguration. Currently, there's no easy way to produce a single script from which differently formatted versions can be generated (e.g., with different fonts or margins). That's a serious limitation. If it turns out that anyone other than me wants to use the template, I can try to do something about that.

Header. `modern-play` puts a page number (and nothing else) in the upper right corner of each page in the script proper. Some submission opportunities call for a header with extra information, such as the title of the play and/or the name of the author. Currently, if you want more in the header it's up to you to modify the output file. If it turns out that anyone other than me wants to use the template, I can try to do something about that.

Efficiency. Selecting styles from a menu is not onerous, but it can be made a bit more efficient by creating macros that select styles and then binding those macros to keys. That is a tedious but not difficult exercise in Word or LibreOffice.

Installing and using `modern-play`

`modern-play.dotx` is the Word template and `modern-play.ott` the template for LibreOffice.

The rough-and-ready way to create a new script with one of these (after saving it on your computer) is to open the template (Word and LibreOffice will recognize the file extension and do the right thing), and then do "Save As" in order to accomplish three things: rename it to whatever you want to call your script; choose the place you want the script saved; save it as a .docx file. From then on, you edit that .docx file with no further glance at the template.

It would be more elegant to use Word or LibreOffice to *import* the template so that you won't have to remember where you saved it and so that you can access ot through the "File" menu of the word processor. Instructions for doing that can be found on the web.

To select a style double-click on its entry in the menu of styles. Here's how to display the menu in its most convenient form:

LibreOffice. Use F11 (or Styles > Manage Styles) to open a window listing all available styles. At the bottom of that window is a dropdown menu. From it choose "Custom Styles", which will list only the styles introduced by `modern-play`. Leave that window open while you edit your file.

Word. The ribbon at the top of the Word display contains an entry for styles. Click on the tiny arrow in its bottom right corner. In the window that opens navigate to

        Options > Select styles to show > In current document

which includes a menu for selecting the order in which the list of all available styles will be displayed. Choose "Based on". The styles defined in `modern-play` will be displayed at the very end of that list. Scroll down to Vanilla and leave the window open while you edit your file.