

Hastings Writers Group (Notes)

The Prologue

Monologue

A monologue is a single speech given by one character, either to another character or characters or to the audience through the fourth wall.

Once more unto the breach...

A soliloquy is essentially the same thing, but it's usually assumed nowadays that a soliloquy is the actor speaking the character's internal thoughts rather than communicating to others.

To be, or not to be...

There can be some ambiguity depending on how the speech is presented.

Now is the winter of our discontent....

This is a 'Previously on Richard III'... aka a prologue.

The fourth wall is the pretence that the audience doesn't exist... The character is either talking to themselves, or an unseen character in the direction of the audience.

In a film or play, if there are two or more characters talking it's known as 'dialogue'.

If a character gets more than a few sentences without others replying or interrupting then your character 'has a speech'.

When does a speech become a monologue?

I don't think there's a strict definition.

In drama (which includes comedy) a long speech becomes (popularly) known as a 'Monologue' if it can be taken out of the play and performed, at an audition or as a party-piece for example, and still make sense. If it can't be taken out of the context of the play, it's still a monologue but won't get constantly repeated and become famous.

So a monologue, for the purpose of your competition, is a long speech that is, in itself a self contained speech, collection of thoughts, anecdote, short one-person play or something I haven't thought of...

Alan Bennett's monologues are One Character Plays and/or stories told by a character.

Short Monologues 3 to 7 minutes.

A stand alone monologue could take one of several forms:

A short story.

Alan Bennett's monologues are characters telling part of their own story. Their story reveals to the audience something about their life that they aren't aware of. This gives the story a poignancy, and an emotional impact.

Your character could be:

A character like a politician or spokesperson making a formal speech.

Someone giving evidence in court.

A teacher talking to a class, possibly an unseen unruly one.

A tour, or museum guide.

A salesman

Your character could be one side of a telephone conversation or a Zoom call, or the last transmission of a person on a space ship whose recording has taken years (or millions of years) to arrive...

You could construct a short play with sound effects and props, movement and costume changes.

It doesn't have to be set in the present, or even in the real world.

There are no rules, but what works best.

Try to evoke the period, world or atmosphere with the character's manner and speech, rather than have them deliver it as information (if the audience can work it out or just feel the atmosphere without having it described for them they'll probably enjoy it more, and feel clever... never a bad thing.)

Reveal the moments, plot points, insights, twists exactly as you would in a short story. If you're writing a comedy, try it on somebody who'll give you an honest reaction.

One person plays don't have to be all speech, they can have action, sound effects and stage directions.

Your monologue could require the performer to play different voices. Think of Andy Serkis performing the argument between Gollum and his alter ego Sméagol in *The Lord Of The Rings*.

Monologues can become full length plays where actors perform different characters in multiple voices, or single character pieces.

Patrick Stewart has toured a one man production of A Christmas Carol

Actor Julian Glover's regularly toured a one man telling of Beowulf (Now performed by his son) – A story originally performed by Anglo Saxon bards.

The **East Enders** episode '**Pretty Baby**' was a monologue episode, known as a "single-hander". Written by Tony Jordan for Dot Cotton played by June Brown.

Single voice plays include:

Krapp's Last Tape by Samuel Beckett. A one act play written for actor Patrick McGee.

Shirley Valentine by Willy Russell

Geoffrey Bernard is Unwell, by Keith Waterhouse (Not originally strictly for one person, but a one person adaptation was made in 2019).

Monologuists

Performers known for monologues in character (character sketches):

Dan Leno (Victorian, probably the most famous practitioner in the 1880s)

Joyce Grenfell

Ronnie Barker

Bob Newhart

Ronnie Corbett and Dave Allen are known for telling extended conversational stories to their audiences.

Monologues and single voice plays can be a great – and cheap – way for a writer and actor to create a production showcasing and promoting their talent.

Creating character and situations using a 'Secret Cast'

Krapp's Last Tape by Samuel Beckett. Was written for actor Patrick McGee. Its original (or working) title was 'Magee Monologue'.

Beckett apparently told Magee that his voice was the one he heard inside his mind.

The play was inspired by Beckett's experience of listening to Magee reading on the BBC Third Programme...

I create characters by choosing a secret cast to write for... it seems to work for me.

I tend to choose the more theatrical (higher contrast) characterisations from the last century, often mixed with people I've known. Your character may be a combination of two or more others.

Imagine Peter Falk (Columbo) running a chip shop dealing with customers played by Peggy Mount and Margaret Rutherford...

If it helps, you can mix in animal types (many actors do). You can think of a character as cat-like, fox-like or a shark-like. Just allow your secret cast to help you see what you're writing.

I wrote a character in a one act play (Backstage Whispers) for an actress (Philippa) but the hidden character I used while writing was Tony Hancock in his 'Hancock' character, which gave the attitude and tone I wanted...

As a thought experiment, imagine the cast of Dads Army as the staff in a hotel, the crew of a sailing ship or the Starship Enterprise.

And finally...

You wouldn't usually tell anyone who your secret cast is.

[I've put some examples of monologue performance through the ages on a page here.](#)

Thomas Everchild