



## The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus

100 points (x3)

One-Act Plays: The Faustian Bargain  
A.P. ENGLISH LITERATURE & COMPOSITION  
Archbishop Moeller High School, Mr. Rose

### Due Dates:

Synopsis Fact Sheet: \_\_\_\_\_

One-Act Play + Presentation: \_\_\_\_\_

### Assignment: One-Act Play

You will be working in small groups to write an original one-act play that somehow involves a Faustian bargain. This does not mean that you will be re-telling a story (like *Doctor Faustus* or "The Devil and Tom Walker") but coming up with your own original storyline.

### Subject: The Faustian Bargain

The idea of an individual selling his or her soul to the devil for youth, knowledge, wealth or power is an old motif in Christian folklore, one that had become attached to the historical persona of Johannes Faustus. The phrase "Faustian bargain" has entered the English lexicon in a less literal way, referring not just to a deal made with the devil but to any deal made for a short-term gain with great costs in the long run. Your play may involve either type of Faustian bargain. You are free to write an ending that is tragic, comic, etc.



### Step One: Synopsis Fact Sheet

This should include the following information: names of all students participating, the name of the play, the names and a short description of the characters, and a prose synopsis of the play written in present tense. One student from your group will be presenting (reading) the synopsis on the day it is due. The synopsis fact sheet will be turned in.

### Step Two: Final Presentation

There are two parts to the final presentation: the play itself, written in standard play format (see sample); and the "production" of the play. Your play may be produced in a number of ways, including performing a live *dramatic* performance, videotaping a simple production of the play, or audio-taping the play (using sound effects, etc.) as if the play were being produced for radio. Whichever method of production you choose, it will be presented to the class on the due date.

The following pages present a "How To" guide... Use this resource!

# How To Write a One-Act Play/Film

## What Is a One-Act Play?

A one-act play is usually between 10-40 pages long, and is often called a “tenner” because of the short length. Writing one-acts can be an excellent way for new playwrights to learn the basics of story and character construction. While there are no set rules for how to write a one-act play, some basic guidelines may help clear away any confusing format or content problems.

Traditional plays, and often one-act plays, sometimes conform to the unities of drama as discussed by the philosopher Aristotle. These guidelines suggest that a play should take place with a unity of location, time and action. In other words, plays should have:

- one location,
- be set over a period of no more than one day,
- and have one central plot.

These unities are somewhat more helpful in writing one-acts, as the 10-40 minute running time will not leave a lot of room for set changes or subplots.

A one-act play usually will have four or fewer characters that are developed in varying degrees. Depending on the story you are trying to tell, there may be one or more main characters. In some short plays, the roles are balanced equally; in others, some roles may only have a few lines. Even though your play is short, you should have a clear idea of who your characters are, what they want, and how they will try to get what they want.

The most important element to any play is **conflict**. This does not necessarily mean fighting or arguing. A man being sad about throwing away his baby blanket is in conflict with himself. Equally, two people trying to decide what couch to buy is also a conflict. Conflicts are essential to give a scene and a play life.

Because a one-act play is so short, most experts recommend you avoid extensive exposition. If the play is about Mary and John arguing in a restaurant, the audience does not need to know where they were born, how many siblings they have or any information extraneous to the play. It does not mean that the playwright cannot know these things, but you can waste valuable time giving explanations or background about things that do not affect the immediate outcome of the scene or situation. Avoid using a narrator.

You may wish to read examples of one-act plays to understand how they are written and what can be done with them. If you like classical literature, Moliere and Anton Chekov both wrote extensive collections of one-acts. David Ives is considered by many theater critics to be the greatest modern mind when it comes to one-act comedies. For drama, you may wish to look at the work of Horton Foote or David Henry Hwang.

## Rules of Thumb

One-Act plays should:

- be set in a single location
- be set over a period of no more than one day
- have one central plot
- have four or fewer characters
- have conflict that is resolved by the end
- develop characters primarily through dialogue
- not rely on the use of a narrator (instead, dramatize everything)
- be a complete, compact drama, with a beginning, middle and end
- follow the standard format of a short story
  - opening situation
  - rising action, which develops the conflict
  - conflict
  - climax (the turning point)
  - falling action
  - resolution (the conflict is resolved)

## Story Development – Ten Tips

1. Create a world that's true to real life or fantastical or that mixes the mundane with the magical. But whatever set of rules you create for that world, make sure you follow them.
2. Write a conflict that builds as the play progresses. As you structure the conflict, think in terms of your play having a beginning, a middle and an end.
3. Write characters that want something (which puts them in conflict with other characters) and try to get what they want at every moment.
4. Make sure that each character has something at stake, a consequence if he doesn't get what he wants.
5. Create a "ticking clock" that puts the characters under pressure to get what they want right away.
6. Make sure there is a good reason, an "event," for your play. It's not enough for two characters to sit around and talk for a while and then leave. There needs to be some important reason why we're watching them now, at this particular moment.
7. Write dialogue that illuminates your characters and advances the plot at the same time.
8. Make each character speak in a distinctive voice. If you have trouble with that, try imagining a specific actor you know - even if it's someone who will never play the part - in the role.
9. Do *not* have a character tell us something she can show us instead. For example, it's much more effective to hide under the bed than to say "I'm afraid."
10. Give each character a "moment," something that justifies the character's existence in your play and that makes him attractive for an actor to play.

**WUNDERKIND by Darren Callahan**  
**SAMPLE: One-Act Play**

(LIGHTS RISE on an office.

Seated is ALBERT, flustered, pulling at his necktie.

Enter BRANDON.)

ALBERT

Sit. Now.

(BRANDON does as he's told, in a spot away from the door. ALBERT picks up a piece of paper and waves it in the air.)

ALBERT (Continued)

Tell me you've seen this.

BRANDON

I have. Just now.

ALBERT

This is crap. This memo. It's...it's...tell me it's crap.

BRANDON

Most of it.

ALBERT

What's true?

BRANDON

The part about me being named Brandon Coply.

(ALBERT smiles.)

ALBERT

I knew it. I knew it. This is political. Smells of it. Indulge me...

(MORE)

ALBERT (Continued)

(Reading)

"Effective immediately, Brandon Coply is no longer an employee of the New Hampshire Star. After an investigation of allegations..."

(Breaking)

Allegations!

(Reading)

"...allegations of misconduct related to his series on the sheriff's office we are forced..."

(Breaking)

FORCED!

BRANDON

I know what it says.

ALBERT

Aren't you angry? Doesn't it just burn your feet.

BRANDON

Yes.

ALBERT

Well show 'em, show 'em, my boy! This is nineteen-seventy-five. This isn't the 50s. This isn't the Age of McCarthyism. We're not blacklisting anybody because of what they've written. Your sources -- they're in line, right? Not like it says here. "Coerced, bribed, beaten."

BRANDON

Sources are all golden, Albert. Swear to it.

ALBERT

Get your notes. We're bringing them up to Fitzgerald.

(ALBERT stands. BRANDON hesitates.)

ALBERT (Continued)

Your notes, your notes. Come on.

BRANDON

They're missing. From my desk.

ALBERT

Don't tell me!

(Pause)

You have safety copies? Carbons?

BRANDON

No.

ALBERT

Brandon. Come on! You remember the advice I gave you. Make *copies*. Copy everything! Store it in a safe place. It's EVIDENCE. It's sometimes *judicial*. It's got to remain safe as houses.

BRANDON

There just wasn't...time. I had to make deadline.

ALBERT

Fine. It's done. It's not right, but it's done. What can we go up there with? Got anything at home? In your case?

BRANDON

I...maybe at home, I don't know.

ALBERT

Brandon!

(Knocks. ALBERT looks through the slatted window. He waves the person inside the office.

Enter CELIA carrying memo.)

CELIA

This.

ALBERT

It's a crime. Isn't it, Celia?

CELIA

Brandon, I'm so sorry.

ALBERT

We're fighting it.

CELIA

You are?

BRANDON

They stole my notes. All my proof.

CELIA

Who did?

ALBERT

(To CELIA)

Do you have anything we could take up to Fitzgerald. Check stubs, ah, ah, dictation, steno notes, anything.

CELIA

No. No, I don't. Brandon, he keeps his own files.

ALBERT

Come on now! I raised this boy, brought him into the industry. I'm not gonna-- Crummy. Damn crummy. Not a private conversation with you, but a note to all those you touch. And I'm your editor, kid. No respect upstairs for us. Those moneymen in their box. That miserable office. Fitzgerald. Paaah!

(ALBERT returns to the desk and picks up his phone.)

CELIA

Who are you calling?

ALBERT

*You know.*

CELIA

Albert, be caref...

ALBERT

(Into phone)

Hello? Yeah. Albert Cummings here.

(Pause)

Oh, he can't take my call?

(MORE)

ALBERT (Continued)

(Rolls eyes)

Send him down then. Yes. Send him down. Pronto.

(Angry)

If he's not here in one minute...well then I quit!

(ALBERT slams down the phone.)

BRANDON

Mr. Cummings. I-- I don't know what to say. That was a very sweet gesture. But you're not really gonna --

CELIA

I should leave.

ALBERT

No, you stay. Unless you're afraid to stand by us.

CELIA

I. I'm only a typist, I--

ALBERT

Go, then, go! Save yourselves!

(ALBERT starts to shoo her away.)

ALBERT (Continued)

Don't let a little *injustice* get between you and your minimum wage! A man's been wronged, Celia, but if you feel that a little *distance* is just what the doctor or--

CELIA

I'll be outside if you need me.

ALBERT

Take your phony concern out of here, then. We don't need it.

(ALBERT shuts the door on CELIA.)

ALBERT (Continued)

I guess it's just you and me, kid. This office is becoming our Alamo. People getting shot left and right, falling away from our sides.

(Eyes looking through the door glass)

And here comes Santa Anna now!

(Enter FITZGERALD, without knocking, in a huff. He stops short just inside the door at the sight of BRANDON, seated.)

FITZGERALD

(Soft)

Oh. You're still here. I thought the guards would have--

ALBERT

Call your goons. Do it. You're about to lose two great newsmen, Mr. Fitzgerald. Brandon here...well, he's the finest reporter I've ever seen. No mere cub. The real deal. Tough, inventive, and courageous. That piece on the sheriff, it was brilliant. And me, his editor. Spotted his talent and brought him up through the ranks. Brought me story after story. Twenty-two years of experience under my belt and I've never seen such a self-starter. And you'll lose the both of us with this cockamamie memo of yours. What a numbskull play! You and I have wrestled before, but this is one too far. To ransack an employee's desk!

FITZGERALD

Not everything I know is in that memo, Albert. You had better watch yourself.

(BRANDON bolts from his chair and pins FITZGERALD to the wall of the office. ALBERT is stunned.)

BRANDON pulls a revolver from his pocket and puts it to FITZGERALD's cheek.)

BRANDON

Now you BE GOOD. Be GOOD.

(MORE)

BRANDON (Continued)

(Pause)

That's better.

(Softly)

I'm not asking, I'm telling. This job is mine. I earned it. And I've got so much dirt on this place it would make the sheriff story look like Walt Disney.

FITZGERALD

Please don't. Please don't shoot.

ALBERT

(Confused)

Brandon, what...

BRANDON

I want a retraction. Another memo. I want it today. Within the hour. Hear me *old man*? You had no right to do what you did. Make me look like a freak. Like no one's supposed to touch me. The last ten minutes I've been scheming how to get onto your floor without the elevator boy calling the guards. Luckily...Albert here has some guts.

FITZGERALD

They're just outside, son. You don't want to--

(BRANDON pushes the gun into FITZGERALD's cheek.)

BRANDON

I'm gonna do right by you, Mr. Fitzgerald. I'm gonna write you good stories. Real stories. You need someone like me in the streets. I get some answers. I get some *answers*. Albert knows what I write. Tell 'em, Albert. Some people are afraid to get their hands dirty. This paper's full of cowards. Well not me. My hands are real dirty. And I like it that way.

(Pause.)

FITZGERALD

Whatever you want...Brandon...whatever you want. Just please.

(Pause)

I have a daughter, a son, a--

(BRANDON backs away. He goes into the corner of the office and pockets the pistol, looking to ALBERT, then FITZGERALD, then back again to ALBERT.)

ALBERT

(Disgusted)

Brandon...

(Long pause.)

BRANDON

Get typing.

(Lights out.)