

# Playwrights for Change 2026

Playwrights for Change is a national theater for social change initiative by the American Alliance for Theatre in Education (AATE). Orlando Family Stage is hosting the Orlando regional competition this spring by accepting ten-minute plays for a playwriting competition open to middle and high school students. Orlando Family Stage adjudicates entries and submits the winning play to compete at the national level!

**2026 Prompt**  
**Widening Our Circle of Compassion**

# Widening Our Circle of Compassion

When we first consider compassion, it often extends to our family and close friends. But what happens when we broaden that view, recognizing our deep interconnectedness to all people—and choose to act kindly not only toward those who we perceive are different from us, but toward individuals we view as adversaries and even the natural world? The true challenge is to practice empathy in these wider, more difficult spaces.

This guide provides suggestions for facilitating meaningful discussions of this year's prompt with your students. You will find two approaches to defining compassion, followed by suggested activities that dive deeper into the prompt. AATE has also provided a guide of [Creative Tips for Student Playwrights](#) for reference.

## Rules

- Submissions should be no more than ten minutes when read aloud and fit within the theme of "Widening Our Circle of Compassion."
- Play must have no more than six characters. Work must be original and created by only one author. View AATE's [Style Guide](#) for formatting guidelines.
- Entries are submitted online via [this Google Form](#) or on paper through the mail. Please contact [education@orlandofamilystage.com](mailto:education@orlandofamilystage.com) if you plan to submit by mail to receive further instructions.

## Finalists

- After the submission window closes, Orlando Family Stage will select a finalist to submit to the national contest.
- Orlando Family Stage will provide feedback to the selected finalist to further develop and strengthen their submission.
- The Orlando Family Stage finalist may potentially receive a new play workshop with Orlando Family Stage's Teen Perspectives Lab and/or a staged reading for the public.

## Important Dates

Submissions Open: [Open NOW!](#)

Submissions Close: February 13, 2026

Winners Notified: March 2, 2026

*Subject to Change*

## Student Spotlight Paulina Senges-Ocasio



A Lake Nona High School student, Paulina was last year's National Winner of the AATE Playwrights for Change competition for her ten-minute play, ***Dear Doris Grant***.

An Orlando Family Stage nominee, her play was selected from submissions across the U.S. and Canada, standing out for its thoughtful response to the 2025 theme **Empathy in Action**.

# WIDENING OUR CIRCLE OF COMPASSION

These are suggestions on how to approach and discuss this year's prompt with your students. We encourage you to use these questions as a starting point for classroom activities.

## DEFINING COMPASSION: GROUP ACTIVITY

- Adapted from *What is Power? Creating Group Definitions* (Alrutz and Hoare 176-178)

**Students will need a piece of paper and a writing utensil. Explain:**

- The dictionary defines *compassion* as "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it." In other words, compassion is seeing that someone is struggling and wanting to take action to ease their pain.
- On your piece of paper, reflect on what the word compassion means to you. What does compassion look like in the world? Where and how does it show up in your life? *Students can write sentences, phrases, words, or even draw pictures.*
- Next, brainstorm responses to the following prompts:
  - Compassion is...
  - Compassion means...
- Looking at your brainstorm, write your personal definition of compassion that you are comfortable sharing with a small group.
- Move into a group of three with your paper. Share your definitions with each other. Discuss what is similar or different. Is there any form of compassion that has been left out? Expand your list of possibilities with your group members.
- In your trio, come up with one definition of compassion together, using any parts of the definitions you each wrote. Write your definition in large letters on a new piece of paper to share with the class.

**Direct each group to share their definitions with the class.**

As they share out, ask the class if each definition falls into the category of Compassion of Others, Compassion of Self, or Compassion of Surroundings. Definitions might include overlap in multiple categories.

- Write the following words on the whiteboard or chalkboard in large letters to help guide students in this task: Others | Self | Surroundings.
- Use the following definitions to help with facilitation:
  - Compassion for Others: Seeing pain or suffering and taking action to help relieve it. This can be seen within family or social circles or at a global level. This can also include compassion shown toward all living beings.
  - Compassion for Self: Sharing warmth and non-judgemental understanding to one's self like they would to someone else.
  - Compassion for Surroundings: Seeing value in nature or other spaces and taking steps to care for it.
- Have students return to their initial brainstorming and identify which categories their ideas fall under. Challenge them to identify at least one from each category, adding more ideas if needed.



# WIDENING OUR CIRCLE OF COMPASSION

## DEFINING COMPASSION: GROUP ACTIVITY

If time allows, give each student one minute to share their examples with their group. Alternatively, encourage students to respond individually or as a group to the following prompts (coming up with as many ideas as possible for each prompt):

- a. Compassion looks like...
- b. Compassion smells like...
- c. Compassion feels like...
- d. Compassion sounds like...
- e. Compassion says...

### Reflection Questions:

- a. Which category of compassion are we most familiar with?
- b. Which category of compassion do you tend to think about most often?
- c. Which category of compassion most influences the experiences you have had in the world?

### Defining Compassion: Class Discussion

- What is compassion? Why is it important? As a class, come up with your own definition.
  - Compassion is defined as "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it"
- How is compassion different from empathy or other emotions?
  - While related to empathy and other similar emotions, compassion is set apart by the call to action that is associated with it. Write this on the whiteboard or chalkboard: Empathy + Action = Compassion
- We can show compassion not only to others, but also to ourselves and our surroundings. As a class, discuss examples of each. Are any of these more important than others? Which one do we think is easiest? Most challenging?
  - Compassion for Others: Seeing pain or suffering and taking action to help relieve it. This can be seen within family or social circles or at a global level. This can also include compassion shown toward all living beings.
  - Compassion for Self: Sharing warmth and non-judgemental understanding to one's self like they would to someone else.
  - Compassion for Surroundings: Seeing value in nature or other spaces and taking steps to care for it.



# WIDENING OUR CIRCLE OF COMPASSION

## ACTIVITY 1: COMPASSION FOR INDIVIDUALS WE VIEW AS ADVERSARIES

An adversary is one's opponent in a contest, conflict, or dispute. It can be very challenging to extend compassion to those we view as adversaries. This activity encourages students to think critically about this concept through well-known villains in common fairytales before turning attention to themselves and their own relationships.

### Part 1: Group Work

- a. Divide students into groups of 3-5. Have each group select a common fairytale, such as *The Three Little Pigs* or *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. Have students identify the following:
  - i. Who is the adversary in this story? What do they do to earn this title? If the reasoning behind their actions is not clear, why do you think they do what they do?
  - ii. Who is their energy or actions directed at? How did this character respond in the story, and what was the result of this response?
  - iii. How might the story have changed if compassion had been extended? Discuss as many alternative scenarios as possible. Encourage students to be creative in their approach, perhaps by adding specific qualities to characters that were not part of the original story.
- b. Instruct each group to choose one scenario to act out. Challenge each group to act out their chosen scenario in 3-5 minutes.

### Part 2: Individual Reflection

- a. Let students know that you'll be guiding them through a brief reflection on a past experience that may have been challenging or difficult. Emphasize that this activity will only take a few minutes and that they have full control over which experience they choose to reflect on. Encourage them to select an experience that feels safe and comfortable to think about—not necessarily the most significant or difficult moment they've ever faced, but one they feel okay revisiting for a short time. Lead students to silently consider the following questions:
  - i. Think of an individual you consider to be an adversary. What did they do to earn this title? How did their actions affect you?
  - ii. Consider empathy: Why do you think they did it? What about them might you not know or understand? How might you have responded if you had been in their situation?
  - iii. How did you respond to their actions? Did this response help or hurt the situation? How do you feel about this person today?
  - iv. How could you have responded differently? Do you think a different response might have led to a different outcome?
  - v. Encourage students to silently thank this person for the learning experience and take a deep breath to release any difficult feelings that may have surfaced.

### Part 3: Class Discussion

- a. There are situations in which we should extend compassion to people who have wronged us, but where do we draw the line? Are there situations where it might be in our best interest to refrain from extending compassion?
- b. Do adversaries need to be people? Are there any systems or processes that we might consider adversarial? How might we show compassion within or among these systems? (For example, the legal system, frameworks of politics, Artificial Intelligence, etc.)



# WIDENING OUR CIRCLE OF COMPASSION

## ACTIVITY 2: COMPASSION FOR THOSE WHO ARE DIFFERENT FROM US

Our differences define us as individuals, but they can also be a source of deep connection when we choose to approach them with an open mind. By actively listening to what others are saying and by practicing empathy, we can create an environment that fosters compassion and meaningful conversation. This activity guides students to explore their similarities before turning attention to critical thinking about our differences.

### Part 1: The Truth About Me (Alrutz and Hoare 85-86)

- a. Invite students to stand in a large circle. Stand in the middle of the circle to give directions for the action.
- b. Encourage participants to look around and note that everyone in the circle has a spot, except for the leader of the round, who is standing in the center.
- c. Explain to the group:
  - i. As the person in the middle of the circle, I will offer a statement to the group about something that is true for me: "The truth about me is that I am the oldest in my family." or "The truth about me is that I have a cat."
  - ii. If the statement is also true for you, you will leave your spot and quickly find a new spot across the circle.
  - iii. Ultimately, one person will be left without a spot in the circle. Whoever is left in the middle offers a new statement to the group—something that is true for them.
  - iv. You have control over what you would like to share and when you would like to move.
- d. The action continues until everyone has had a turn in the middle or time ends.

### Part 2: Class Discussion

- a. What did you notice or learn about our group?
- b. Were you surprised by any of our truths? Which statements or movements made an impact on you?

### Part 3: Individual Writing Activity

- a. Encourage students to free write for a full 3-5 minutes, considering the following questions:
  - i. How do your truths compare to some of the truths your classmates shared? How are they similar or different?
  - ii. What might be some benefits of having differences among us?
  - iii. What might be some challenges of having differences among us?
  - iv. How can we show compassion to those who are different from us? Why might this be important?



# WIDENING OUR CIRCLE OF COMPASSION

## ACTIVITY 3: COMPASSION FOR THE NATURAL WORLD

All living things are interconnected, and our existence is impacted by our understanding of the world around us. In this activity, students first imagine an ideal natural environment and then reflect on the barriers that stand in the way of creating such spaces.

### Part 1: Group Activity

- a. Divide students into groups of 3-5. On a piece of paper, have each group draw a picture of an ideal natural environment. Students are encouraged to include labels or words to help define their space. Consider the following:
  - i. Where is your environment located? Under the sea, a backyard garden, a mountain, a field, etc.
  - ii. What does this ideal environment look like? Identify what is both included and excluded to make this environment thrive.
  - iii. Encourage students to include as much detail as possible. Have each group share their drawing with the class.

### Part 2: Group or Class Discussion

- a. What might happen to your ideal natural environment if humans were added?
  - i. What is the worst thing that could happen?
  - ii. What is the best thing that could happen?
- b. Are there other, non-human factors that could impact this environment? What are they, and how would they create an impact?
- c. How can we center compassion when it comes to the natural world?

## MORE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do the internet and social media expand our reach of compassion? What might be beneficial or detrimental to this expanded reach?
2. "Wider, more difficult spaces" can include environments, situations, or ideas that challenge our comfort zones. Thinking beyond physical spaces, what other spaces might we consider? How can we challenge ourselves to show compassion in these spaces?
3. Compassion fatigue happens when someone feels emotionally, physically, and mentally drained after caring for others who are going through trauma, pain, or loss. It can affect people in helping roles—like caregivers, doctors, nurses, teachers, or social workers—who spend a lot of time supporting those in difficult situations. Have you ever had any similar feelings? What are ways we can take care of ourselves when we are experiencing fatigue?





## FLORIDA STATE STANDARDS

### Writing Standards

LAFS.1.RL.1.2 – Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.

LAFS.K-12.W.1.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

LAFS.68.WHST.2.4 – Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to the task, purpose, and audience.

## Questions

### Contact Us Email:

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Phone: 407-896-7365 (Ext. 219)

[orlandofamilystage.com](http://orlandofamilystage.com)

## Work Cited

Alrutz, Megan, and Lynn Hoare. Devising Critically Engaged Theatre with Youth: The Performing Justice Project. Routledge, 2020.

# 100 YEARS OF SPOTLIGHTS

Since 1926, Orlando Family Stage has been a cornerstone of civic life in Central Florida. Today, as Florida's home for family theatre and one of the nation's largest professional theatres for young audiences, we create theatrical experiences that center young people and the communities around them.

Our mission is **empowering young people to be brave and empathetic by creating quality theatrical experiences** on stage, in classrooms, and beyond our walls. Through welcoming, imaginative work, Orlando Family Stage invites children and families to connect, reflect, and see the world with new possibility.

Learn more at [OrlandoFamilyStage.com](http://OrlandoFamilyStage.com)

