

Weber State University  
**THEA 3505/ENGL 3350: Playwriting**  
Fall 2013  
Tues/Thurs 10:30-11:50, VBC 211

**Instructor:**

Dr. Jenny Kokai

**Office:** VBC 305

**Office hours:** T/TH 1-2 PM and by appointment

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**Goals and Questions:** To introduce ourselves to the art of playwriting and the creation of scripts for dramatic production. In this class we will not focus on play analysis, but on the discovery and development of our own voices. We will ask ourselves: what forms of drama am I attracted to, do I like to see? What stories do I have that I am burning to tell? What characters do I have waiting to get set down on the page? There is no “right” way to write plays, so we will explore a variety of methods to help students find what techniques work for them.

**Objectives:**

- Students will understand the basic components and terminology associated with a play.
- Students will develop habits that promote daily writing, discipline, and creativity.
- Students will learn how to give constructive feedback using the Lerman Method.
- Students will produce original writing.
- Students will revise and refine work based upon feedback from peers and instructor.

**Theatre Area Objectives:**

1. Have writing skills and ability to use research tools (library, internet, etc.).
6. Have a practical, working knowledge of how to produce a play on stage, including all related performance, script, design, and technical considerations.
7. Have the ability to critically evaluate what they and others have created.
8. Develop necessary skills to be proficient in at least one area of theatre (performance, teaching, technical/design-costume, technical/design-scenery, technical/design-lighting, technical/design-sound, directing, theatre management, or playwriting), with the ability to identify, analyze and resolve specific problems pertaining to that area.
9. Understand the historical context of theatre, drama, and performance including plays, major figures, costumes, scenic innovations, and theoretical approaches, and how these relate to contemporary society and culture.
10. Have experience with individual and collaborative processes needed to produce and understand theatre.

**Attendance:** The Theatre area recognizes the importance of class participation and performance. To this end we enforce the following attendance policy: Tuesday/Thursday classes are allowed 2 absences, Monday/Wednesday/Friday classes are allowed 3

absences, however these absences may not be on a scheduled test day. Once the allowed absence limit has been reached the student's grade will drop incrementally for each additional absence.

Example: Mitzi, an "A" student, has missed 3 classes in a MWF theatre class. Today she is missing class and her grade will drop to an A-. If she misses the next class, her grade will drop to a B+. One more absence and she will have dropped a full letter grade to a B. Tardies are as important an issue as absences. Therefore, 2 tardies equal 1 absence. Students should plan ahead and use absences and tardies wisely.

**Texts:**

- All readings are available through electronic reserves from the library. Students will need to purchase a notebook or binder.

**Recommended Texts:** These books are NOT assigned (although we will have readings from them in our course pack), instead they are books that I have found useful or that I have enjoyed greatly. They may help you as a writer as well, or you may find your own guidebooks.

- Ball, David. Backwards and Forwards. Southern Illinois University Press; 1st edition (July 7, 1983).
- Cameron, Julia. The Artist's Way. United States of America, Jeremy P Tarcher/Putnam: (2002).
- Egri, Lajos. The Art of Dramatic Writing. New York, Touchstone Books (1960).
- Lamott, Anne. Bird by Bird. United States, First Anchor Books: (1995).
- Niggli, Josefina. New Pointers on Playwriting. Boston, The Writer, Inc. (1967).
- Plimpton, George. Playwrights at Work. New York, The Modern Library: (2000).
- Turco, Lewis. Dialogue. Cincinnati, Ohio, Writer's Digest Books, (1989).

**Assignments:** All reading assignments are due for the day they are listed.

- Almost every single class will consist of doing writing exercises, sharing these exercises, and deciding where to take the exercises. Thus, the exercises begun in class NEED TO BE FINISHED AT HOME if they are not completed with in class time.
- If bringing in work to be read, please make one copy for each character in the play so that the play can be best read by your classmates. Please also bring a copy for me with your name on each page.
- Students are expected to keep a journal/notebook/binder in which they use Cameron's "Morning Pages" exercise. Every single day (seven days a week) students need to sit down and write three pages. These pages can be dialogue, they can be poetry, they can be stream of consciousness, it doesn't matter what they are, as long as they are three pages long. I will be periodically and randomly collecting these notebooks to check that this is being done (BRING YOUR NOTEBOOK TO EVERY CLASS), but I will not be grading for content. In fact, I won't even read it. Ever. The important thing is that the exercise is done every day. I will be making my own "Morning Pages" book available for students to see as well.

- The “long” assignments for this class will be the completion of two ten-minute plays. These plays will build on the work done in classes.

**Technology:** We will be doing a lot of writing in class. You are welcome to bring your laptop if you prefer to write on it. You are also welcome to bring headphones and listen to music while you are writing. However, you may not access the internet during class. If you decide to use Facebook, chat, or check email (which I know is very tempting) you’ll be low tech from then on—pencil and paper. Well, I guess you can have a pen. But you’ll need to bring it yourself. Cell phones are strictly verboten, and should be turned silent at the beginning of class.

**Grade Breakdown:**

Participation- 20%

Morning Pages- 20%

First 10 minute play- 20%

Second 10 minute play- 20%

Writing Assignments- 20%

**Participation:** In this class we will be following the Liz Lerman Critical Response process given below. It takes some practice, but successful participation will mean embracing the model and offering feedback generously to your classmates. Participation also means you have done the assigned reading before class and come ready to discuss the material.

(from <http://danceexchange.org/projects/critical-response-process/>)

1. Statements of Meaning: Responders state what was meaningful, evocative, interesting, exciting, striking in the work they have just witnessed.
2. Artist as Questioner: The artist asks questions about the work. After each question, the responders answer. Responders may express opinions if they are in direct response to the question asked and do not contain suggestions for changes.
3. Neutral Questions: Responders ask neutral questions about the work. The artist responds. Questions are neutral when they do not have an opinion couched in them. For example, if you are discussing the lighting of a scene, “Why was it so dark?” is not a neutral question. “What ideas guided your choices about lighting?” is.
4. Opinion Time: Responders state opinions, subject to permission from the artist. The usual form is “I have an opinion about \_\_\_\_\_, would you like to hear it?” The artist has the option to decline opinions for any reason.

**How assignments will be graded:** For the most part, assignments will be graded on effort. Do you embrace the challenge and do you attempt to meet it? I will not be giving grades based on how “good” I think a play is. I do want to see growth throughout the semester. I want to see you trying new things, working on areas you find difficult or problematic, and setting challenges for yourself. I want to see you try each of the writing assignments to the best of your ability, no matter how strange or silly they might seem. We will generally share our exercises in each class and discuss them. You can’t really get a sense if your playwriting works unless it’s performed. If you think offering these up is going to be very difficult, this might not be the right style of writing for you.

**You will receive progress statements on 9/26, 10/31, and 11/26 so that you are comfortable that you know how your progress in the class is being viewed.**

**Weekly Assignments:**

note: our e-reserves password is playwright. Readings will generally be available until the class period after they are due and then gone (for copyright reasons), so please keep up with the reading.

**August 27: Introductions**

Hand out syllabus, go over expectations, introductions

**August 29: We Are All Writers**

“The Basic Tools” Pages 11-24 in The Artist’s Way (on e-reserves)

**Sept 3: What Makes a Playwright?**

“Lillian Hellman” in Playwrights at Work (on e-reserves)

- Basic characteristics of a play
- What plays have we seen that we enjoyed? Hated? Why?
- Writing Exercise: With a partner create a four page script for the “Worst Play Ever Written”

**Sept 5: What do I, a new playwright, have to say?**

- Writing Exercise: interview a partner in the class, introduce them to the class.
  - What did hearing these introductions tell us?
  - Write a monologue that is yourself telling your partner something crucial.

**Sept 10: Meet Debra. Debra will eat only flat food. (Characters)**

**Field Trip: Meet in the Costume Shop**

-Writing Exercise: You will be dressed up as someone else, write a monologue in this person’s voice. How do they speak? Why are they wearing what they’re wearing? Where are they going?

**Sept. 12: Meet Fred. Fred is terrified of socks. (Characters cont.)**

“The Bone Structure” (pgs. 32- 43) in Art of Dramat!c Wr!t!ng (on e-reserves)

-Writing Exercise: taking the Meyers Briggs test. What does this tell us about ourselves? How would this help up create characters?

**Sept 17: “Everyone in Mametville speaks the same!” (Dialogue)**

“Chapter 1” (pgs. 4-14) in Dialogue (on e-reserves)

- Writing Assignment: (this is for next week) eavesdrop on three different conversations. Write down what the people say, word for word. Type up and bring to Sept 20<sup>th</sup> class.
- Examples of scripts by Mamet, Tony Kushner, Jane Wagner, Lillian Hellman
- Writing Exercise: Write a page of dialogue in one of the author’s styles we examined today. How did it feel?

**Sept 19: “Forsooth, people don’t speak in iambs no more” (Dialogue continued)**

- Read the results of our eavesdropping.
- Bring in your own example of dialogue that has struck you, from a television show, a movie, or a play. What makes this dialogue interesting, silly, or “bad” and how could we use it in our plays?
- Writing Exercise: with a partner write (briefly): 2 pages of a soap opera, 2 pages of a serious Tony winning play, 2 pages of play written to change the world, 2 pages of a comedy that’s meant to make a lot of money.

**Sept 24: Attack the hippopotami! (Actions)**

- Watch a bit of “Run Lola Run”
- Watch a bit of “Waiting for Guffman”
- What’s the action in each?
- Writing Exercise: given a series of random actions in class, construct a scene that incorporates them all.

**Sept 26: Debra slaps Fred when he takes her Kraft cheese slice. (Actions 2)**

- Writing Exercise: Begin writing with the specific prompt on the board.
- When we read these out loud, what actions did people add in? How do the various levels of action or inaction show us individuals understanding of what constitutes Action on stage?

**Oct 1: It is bad to kill people. (Premises)**

- “Premise” (pgs. 1-32) in Art of Dramatic Writing (on e-reserves)
- Writing exercise: Credos
- Writing exercise: Write a piece of propaganda (a scene that is to convey a very specific social agenda). How does this sort of premise feel different from other theatre works? Does it? How can we have a clear premise and avoid didacticism?

**Oct 3: Love is stupid. (Premises 2)**

- Writing Exercise: leave class and interview people in the hallways. Ask them the following questions: 1. If you had a t-shirt with a slogan on it, what would that slogan be? 2. What do you think everyone should know? 3. What is one thing you think someone should never do? 4. What’s the point of life?
- Return to class and discuss. What premises did these provide for us? What are other ways of finding premises?

**Oct 8: Harry loves Sally. Sally loves Jack. These are the Days of Our Lives. (Plots)**

- Chapters 1, 2, and 3 from Backwards and Forwards (on e-reserves).
- Writing Exercise: You will be given Point A and a Point B in class, write the scene that gets the characters from A to B. Identify the actions each takes.

**Oct 10: Chris is two weeks from curing cancer. Chris is going blind. (Plots continued)**

- Plays without plots. What happens when nothing happens? Can nothing ever happen in a play?

-Writing Exercise: Write a scene in which your characters do nothing. Absolutely nothing. Read these out loud. What do we see?

**Oct 15: Waiting For That Darn Muse**

“Writer’s Block” from Bird by Bird (on e-reserves)

-Writing Exercise: Think of 5 plays that could take place in small Italian Restaurant. 5 that could take place in a Laundromat. 5 that could take place on Mars. (We’ll suggest other locations in class)

**Oct 17: Waiting For That Darn Muse  
Field Trip**

**Oct 22: Readings of First Plays**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

**Oct 24th: Readings of First Plays**

6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

**Oct 29: Readings of First Plays**

11. \_\_\_\_\_
12. \_\_\_\_\_
13. \_\_\_\_\_
14. \_\_\_\_\_
15. \_\_\_\_\_

**Oct 31: “I think it won’t be as bad as the others” (criticism and the inevitable Revisions)**

“Tom Stoppard” in Playwrights at Work (on e-reserves)

-Writing Exercise- Give your script to a partner and have them slice out what they see as all extraneous words or lines. Be ruthless. What lines do you cry to see gone? How does the pace of this new (shorter) script feel?

**Nov 5: “Crappy First Drafts” (taking the good and leaving the bad behind)**

“First Drafts” and “Perfectionism”(21-32) in Bird by Bird (e-reserves)

-Writing Exercise: take a character from your play out of your play. Take them to the Children’s play area at McDonald’s. What happens?

-Writing Exercise: take a character from your play and introduce them to the person on earth they most hate. What happens?

**Nov 7: No Class today!**

**Nov 12: “As you know, Mr. Butler, we’re standing here in the atrium of the Farthington Mansion” (Dealing with exposition)**

“Exposition” (pgs. 48-56) in New Pointers on Playwriting (e-reserves)

-Writing Exercise: Two characters are in a car with each other. They have an established relationship, and something terrible has happened to them in the past week. Each wants something from the other. Have the characters try to get what they want from the other without saying what it is. Communicate their history without feather dusters.

**Nov 14: “As you know, Miss Frederique, the Farthington family has been plagued by a series of prank phone calls lately” (Exposition day 2)**

What would happen if there were no exposition?

“Harold Pinter” in Playwrights at Work (e-reserves)

-Writing Exercise: After reading a scene from The Birthday Party, rewrite the scene filling in all of the missing exposition. What does this do to the play?

**Nov 19: Second Play Readings**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

**Nov 19: Second Play Readings Continued**

6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

**Nov 21: Second Play Readings Continued**

11. \_\_\_\_\_
12. \_\_\_\_\_
13. \_\_\_\_\_
14. \_\_\_\_\_
15. \_\_\_\_\_

**Nov 26: Writing is fun; writing is random.**

-Writing Exercise: bring your favorite music. Today we’ll be using crayons, markers, and fingerpaints to recharge our creative juices. Writing should be fun. If we’re having fun we should want to write.

**Nov 28: NO CLASS- THANKSGIVING**

**Nov 29: Writing is fun; writing is random (day 2).**

-Writing Exercise: Playwriting Poker.

**Dec 3: Revisions and Next Steps**

-self-evaluation, class discussion

**Dec 5: Am I finished? Is it done now? Anybody?**

“How do you know when you’re done?” (93-95) in Bird by Bird (e-reserves)

-Wrap-up, evaluations, food

**Academic Dishonesty:** As specified in PPM 6-22 IV D, cheating and plagiarism violate the Student Code. Plagiarism is “the unacknowledged (uncited) use of any other person’s or group’s ideas or work.” Students found guilty of cheating or plagiarism are subject to failure of a specific assignment, or, in more serious cases, failure of the entire course.

**Core Beliefs:** According to PPM 6-22 IV, students are to “[d]etermine, before the last day to drop courses without penalty, when course requirements conflict with a student's core beliefs. If there is such a conflict, the student should consider dropping the class. A student who finds this solution impracticable may request a resolution from the instructor. This policy does not oblige the instructor to grant the request, except in those cases when a denial would be arbitrary and capricious or illegal. This request must be made to the instructor in writing and the student must deliver a copy of the request to the office of the department head. The student's request must articulate the burden the requirement would place on the student's beliefs.” As a note, I am not willing to censor your fellow students and their writing. Each student has an individual voice and it is very likely topics and language will come up that may be offensive to some.

**DEPARTMENT COURSE CONTENT POLICY:** Some of the writings, lectures, discussions or presentations in this course may include material that some students may find offensive. Please review the syllabus carefully to see if the course is one that you are committed to taking. If you have a concern, please discuss it with me at your earliest convenience.

**Disability Accommodation:** PPM 3-34 notes: “When students seek accommodation in a regularly scheduled course, they have the responsibility to make such requests at the Center for Students with Disabilities before the beginning of the quarter [semester] in which the accommodation is being requested. When a student fails to make such arrangements, interim accommodations can be made by the instructor, pending the determination of the request for a permanent accommodation.”

**Emergency Closure:** If for any reason the university is forced to close for an extended period of time, we will conduct our class via Canvas. Look for announcements through Weber email and on our Canvas page.