

Playwriting: Analysis, Interpretation, and Process

Course Description:

This class introduces students to playwriting. Throughout the quarter, we will discuss:

- How to analyze play texts,
- How we might apply critical interpretations to plays, and
- How to write our own short pieces.

We will read plays in diverse genres and styles by writers working throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Our aim is not to pinpoint what makes a “good” play, but rather, to explore what plays *do*.

The class is divided into three units. We begin with a three-week unit focused on analyzing and interpreting plays. Taking apart the component parts of plays and learning different strategies for exploring what a play does will serve as the basis for your original writing. Our second five-week unit focuses on writing. We will read a variety of plays, which have been chosen to give you examples and strategies for crafting your own work. Our final two-week unit is an in-class writing workshop. Each of you will have your play read aloud by classmates and receive feedback and suggestions from the class.

Course Objectives:

1. Understand the critical and formal analysis of a play as a key step in learning how to write compelling original works.
2. Understand creative writing as a process that requires practice, repetition, and editing.
3. Gain an understanding of the diverse genres and styles contemporary and 20th-century playwrights are using, and learn to write within certain styles/genres.
4. Learn how to incorporate instructor and peer feedback and suggestions into work.
5. Learn how to offer constructive and productive feedback to peers.
6. Participate in class discussions and share own ideas and respond to other students’ contributions.

Course Requirements and Expectations:

Portfolio Project

Week One through Seven you will write a short play Monday-Friday. There are no restrictions or requirements for these daily pieces, except to write one everyday. Aim to spend between fifteen and thirty minutes a day on these short writing assignments. The aim is not to craft a “perfect” piece, but to get into the routine of writing consistently.

The Portfolio Project mirrors Suzan-Lori Parks’ *365 Days/365 Plays* in which she made herself write a piece every day for one year. As she has discussed, some of those pieces were great and some were not. The point of the project was not to produce a masterwork, but rather to imagine writing as a daily practice, overcoming the perception that writing can only happen when inspiration strikes.

You will turn your pieces in each day through the class's website. Every week, you will receive feedback on your pieces from the instructor. At the end of the quarter, you will edit each work based upon instructor feedback and your own ideas. The edited Portfolio is due as a hard copy in class in Week Ten.

Ten-Minute Plays

You are responsible for writing one ten-minute play, due in Week Four. We will read several short plays to give you ideas and strategies for approaching your own piece. The style, characters, genre, and plot of the piece are up to you.

You will turn in as a hard copy in class:

- A list of your characters,
- The full script of your piece (approximately 10 pages), and
- A 500-word artist's statement describing the aim of your play.

The second half of the assignment is to re-conceptualize your ten-minute play as a non-textual, or wordless, piece. This assignment allows you to re-imagine what your play communicates. How might you convey its ideas/themes/emotional beats without words? For example, you might re-imagine your text as a dance-theater piece, which preserves a few lines but translates the majority of your play into movement. Or you might imagine how the play could become an art installation, transforming your play into a series of visual works, audio sounds, etc. This is due the beginning of Week Seven.

Because each of your pieces will take a different form, what you turn in will vary. You will each meet with the instructor outside of class in Week Five to discuss possible directions for your piece, and together we will strategize how you might best convey your ideas. However, each student needs to turn in:

- A 3-5 page artist's statement, discussing the aim of your re-imagined piece and
- A document (which we will discuss together) that describes what your new piece will look like.

Together, we will devise a grading rubric for your play in class. This is a chance for you to articulate what skills you see this project honing and how you would like those skills evaluated.

One-Act Play

Your final project for the class is an original One Act play (approximately 30-40 pages). Several assignments throughout the quarter will prepare you for completing this assignment. In Week Five, you will turn in a plot summary of your play. While this can change, the summary should be a good-faith effort to set out the play's plot, conflict, resolution, and emotional beats. In addition to this summary, you will also turn in a character list and description.

In Week Nine, you will turn in a complete first draft. This draft is due as a hard copy at the beginning of class. Your first draft will serve as your working draft during our two-week, in-class writing workshop. The instructor and your peers will read your play out loud and offer constructive feedback.

A final version of your play is due in Week Eleven. Part of your grade will be based upon your ability to synthesize and incorporate the feedback you received during the writing workshop.

Participation

In-class Participation:

You should arrive to class on time having completed the reading specified on the syllabus with questions and ideas about the reading. You should contribute to the class discussion through thoughtful comments/attentive listening.

You will be graded based upon your in-class participation as follows:

- An “A” student enlivens the classroom with her/his engaging questions and discussions. Her/his remarks are insightful and encourage fellow classmates to think differently about class materials. For example, an A student might relate course content to a recent news article she read or readings from another course.
- A “B” grade for participation is given to students who participate but who do so in a more passive fashion. For example, a “B” student might raise questions but does not always listen to peers’ contributions or waits for other students to open a discussion before speaking.
- A “C” is given to a student who may attend classes regularly but refrains from participation.

Grades

Grading Breakdown

Portfolio Project: 25%

Completing plays by due date: 15%

Final edited compilation: 10%

One Act Play: 30%

Summary: 5%

First draft: 10%

Final draft: 15%

Ten-Minute Play: 30%

Script: 15%

Re-imagining: 15%

In-class participation: 15%

Grading Scale

97-100 A+	87-89 B+	77-79 C+	67-69 D+	59-below F
94-96 A	84-86 B	74-76 C	64-66 D	
90-93 A-	80-83 B-	70-73 C-	60-63 D-	

Readings:

Many of our readings will be available as a course reader for purchase. Full-length plays, however, will not be. You are encouraged to purchase copies of these works and/or check them out from the library:

- *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage* by Heiner Müller
- *Seven Plays* by Bertolt Brecht
- *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang
- *The America Play, and other works* by Suzan-Lori Parks
- *One Flea Spare* by Naomi Wallace

- *Heroes and Saints & Other Plays* by Cherríe Moraga
- *Self Defense and Other Plays* by Carson Krietzner
- *36 Views: a Play* by Naomi Iizuka
- *Disgraced* by Ayad Akhtar
- *The God of Carnage* by Yasmina Reza
- *Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays* by David Ball

Plagiarism:

The school's rules on academic integrity must be followed; you will be held accountable for any violations of school policy.

Calendar:

Part I: Play Analysis

WEEK ONE

Seminar One

Introduction to course and review of syllabus and assignments

- Gustav Freytag, *Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, trans. Elias J. MacEwan (New York: B. Blom, 1968), pages 114-115.

Seminar Two

Frames and Interpretations

- Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
 - Parts VI-XI, XIII.
- Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Straus & Giroux, 1996).
 - "Against Interpretation," pages 3-14.

WEEK TWO

Seminar One

What Happens Next?

- David Ball, *Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983).

Seminar Two

Dramaturgy

- Bertolt Brecht, *Seven Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1961).
 - *Galileo*
- Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
 - "What is dramaturgy?" "Brecht's productive dramaturgy: from Emblem to 'Golden motor,'" and "The Dramaturg and the playwright," pages 17-69 and 121-145.

WEEK THREE

Seminar One

Between the play and theory

- Adrienne Kennedy, *The Adrienne Kennedy Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
 - *Funnyhouse of a Negro*
- Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck, eds., *Intersecting Boundaries: the Theater of Adrienne Kennedy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).
 - “Kennedy's Body Politic: The Mulatta, Menses, and the Medusa,” by Jeanie Forte and “Critical Reflections: Adrienne Kennedy, the Writer, the Work,” by bell hooks, pages 157-169 and 179-188.

Seminar Two

Structuring Time

- Heiner Müller, *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1984).
 - *Hamletmachine*
- Review before class as needed: William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

WEEK FOUR

Part II: Play Writing: Strategies and Examples

Seminar One

Short Works: Realism

- Georgia Douglas Johnson, *Plumes* (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2002).
- Susan Glaspell, *Susan Glaspell: the Complete Plays*, eds. Linda Ben-Zvi and J. Ellen Gainor (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2010).
 - *The Verge*

Seminar Two

Short Works: Surrealism

- Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower* (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2002).
- Maria Irene Fornes, *Mud* (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2007).

Due in class: Ten Minute Play

WEEK FIVE

Seminar One

Scripting History and Race

- David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (New York: Penguin, 1989).
- Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play, and other works* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1995).
 - *The America Play*

Seminar Two

Writing Gender

- Carson Krietzler, *Self Defense and Other Plays* (South Gate, CA: NoPassport Press, 2011).

- *Self Defense, or the Death of Some Salesman*
- Naomi Iizuka, *36 Views: a Play* (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 2003).

Due in class: Outline and plot/character summary of One Act Play and meet with instructor to discuss your re-imagined Ten Minute Play.

WEEK SIX

Seminar One

Developing Characters: Heroines and Saints

- Naomi Wallace, *One Flea Spare* (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2005).
- Cherríe Moraga, *Heroes and Saints & Other Plays* (Albuquerque: West End Press, 1994).
 - *Heroes and Saints*

Seminar Two

Collaborations and Thinking Visually, Part I

- Mark Dion, Lisa Corrin, Miwon Kwon, and Norman Bryson, eds., Mark Dion (London: Phaidon Press, 1997).
 - “Survey. A Natural History of Wonder and a Wonderful History of 'Nature,’” by Lisa Graziose Corrin.
 - “Artist's choice. Why Look at Animals?” by John Berger.
 - “The Natural History Box: Preservation, Categorization and Display, 1995,” by Mark Dion.

WEEK SEVEN

Seminar One

Collaborations and Thinking Visually, Part II

- Watch in class: *Anatomy Theater*, an opera by David Lang and Mark Dion

Seminar Two

Solo Performance, Part I

- Jo Bonney, ed., *Extreme Exposure: An Anthology of Solor Performance Texts from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2000).
 - “Guillermo Gómez-Peña, introduction by Lisa Wolford,” pages 276-285.
 - “Roger Guenveur Smith, introduction by Margo Jefferson,” pages 332-343.

Due in class: Re-imagining of Ten Minute Play

WEEK EIGHT

Seminar One

Solo Performance, Part II

- Sydné Mahone, *Moon Marked and Touched by Sun: Plays by African-American Women* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1994).
Robbie McCauley, “Sally’s Rape,” pages 211-238.

Seminar Two

What Won the Pulitzer? Or Writing for the Critics

- Ayad Akhtar, *Disgraced* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2013).
- Yasmina Reza, *The God of Carnage*, trans. Christopher Hampton (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).

Part III: Writing Lab

WEEK NINE

Seminar One

In-class workshop of students' One Act Plays

Due at the start of class: First Draft of One Act Play

Seminar Two

In-class workshop of students' One Act Plays

WEEK TEN

Seminar One

In-class workshop of students' One Act Plays

Seminar Two

In-class workshop of students' One Act Plays

Due in class: Edited Portfolio Project

WEEK ELEVEN

Due: Final Draft of One Act Play