

INTRODUCTION TO PLAYWRITING

Fall 20██

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Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:30–2:50 p.m.
Purnell Center for the Arts, Room 231

I worship at the church of theater. It's where I go to experience ritual and take stock of my life and be part of a community. – Annie Baker

What is the question that drives you? The audience is there to observe the taking apart of the question, not to listen to you talk. – Erik Ehn

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Introduction to Playwriting is a workshop course in which we will explore writing for the theater through practice and discussion. We will study major components of playwriting, including action, dialogue, and character, and we will deepen our understanding of these components by completing and workshopping writing assignments, providing and receiving feedback, reading the work of contemporary playwrights, and seeing productions. Upon completion of the course, each student will have written and revised two ten-minute plays.

Why take this course?

Introduction to Playwriting will help you develop skills applicable to a wide range of academic disciplines and professional fields.

You will regularly practice analysis, synthesis, and evaluation—three higher-order cognitive skills that will benefit you in any classroom or workplace. You will **analyze** the work of contemporary playwrights, breaking down a play into parts to understand how the whole operates, and you will analyze your classmates' writing and your own to understand where and how the parts hold together or break down. You will **synthesize** your personal observations, experiences, and questions to create original writing, and you will **evaluate** your writing and others' writing to explore possibilities for revision.

In whatever field you pursue, you will inevitably receive feedback on your performance and have to offer others feedback on theirs. Feedback can be scary, but a workshop class like this will give you plenty of practice in receiving and giving feedback. You will learn how to **listen actively to critical feedback, respond gracefully to that feedback, and process that feedback in a productive manner.** You will also learn how to **provide honest, tactful, and productive feedback** to others.

Finally, you will read plays by a selection of writers who are diverse in background as well as style. You will **consider different perspectives and experiences**, which will help you better understand and communicate with the diversity of classmates and colleagues you encounter now and in the future. You will also delve into characters in your own writing that may think and behave differently than you, encouraging you to **deepen your capacity for empathy**, which is invaluable both professionally and personally.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Upon successful completion of this course, you should be able to:

1. Craft short plays with clear action, developed characters, and precise dialogue
2. Contribute productively to a workshop environment with constructive criticism and positive feedback
3. Apply feedback to your own writing through revision
4. Articulate your choices in the revision process
5. Analyze and discuss the craft of contemporary plays
6. Describe how theater is distinct from other forms of dramatic art

REQUIRED TEXTS

Please order the following from a bookseller of your choice:

Neighborhood #3: Requisition of Doom by Jennifer Haley
Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo by Rajiv Joseph
How I Learned to Drive by Paula Vogel

The following plays will be available to you on CMU Box. The ones marked with an * are available via booksellers if you prefer to purchase them:

The Flick by Annie Baker*
A Maze by Rob Handel
Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven by Young Jean Lee*
Trojan Women: A Love Story by Charles Mee
Fool for Love by Sam Shepard*
Seven Guitars by August Wilson*

REQUIRED THEATER ATTENDANCE

Theater is a live, collaborative art, and the script is just one step in the process. To fully understand how to write a play, you must understand how directors, actors, and designers work to realize a play on stage.

As such, you are required to see the following plays at Carnegie Mellon. Tickets can be purchased at the Box Office in the Purnell Center for the Arts. Student tickets are \$10.

1. *Seven Guitars*

October 2 – October 11

2. *One New Works play*

New Works is the series through which CMU graduate playwrights produce their plays. Three playwrights will have work in the festival this fall. You are required to see only one of the plays but encouraged to see all three!

October 22 – October 25

3. *Fool for Love*

November 5 – November 7

OR

Trojan Women: A Love Story

November 13 – November 22

NOTE ABOUT SENSITIVE MATERIAL

Some of the plays we will read in this course—and perhaps some of the plays you or your classmates will write—may examine issues related to race, class, gender, violence, and so forth. If you find yourself uncomfortable with a particular reading and need not to attend a particular class discussion, please let me know. Also, know that you may excuse yourself from a discussion due to personal discomfort with the subject matter if the occasion arises. Our classroom should be a safe space for you to explore and discuss the material; if at some point it does not feel safe to you, you must do what you need to take care of yourself and your classmates.

GRADING

Participation — 25%

Writing exercises — 20%

Theater attendance and reflections — 15%

Two ten-minute plays — 20%

Two ten-minute play revisions and reflection papers — 20%

Your grade will reflect your effort and engagement—not talent or experience.

Participation

Theater is about engaging with a community in the present moment. Thus, in an Introduction to Playwriting workshop course, participation is key. In order to participate, you must be **present** both physically and mentally. Participating means that you:

- Consistently attend class
- Arrive on time
- Engage thoughtfully in class discussions
- Provide appropriate and respectful feedback
- Help create a supportive environment where everyone has room to speak (that is, be careful not to dominate the conversation)
- Demonstrate that you have completed the assigned reading

Please note that I understand verbal participation is easier for some than others. It is important to me to create a safe space for you to participate. If you are a quieter student, know that your contributions will be supported, and please feel free to discuss any participation concerns with me.

Writing Exercises

Throughout the course, you will receive both in-class and out-of-class writing exercises. I will collect the out-of-class writing exercises to provide feedback. You must complete all out-of-class writing exercises to receive full credit for this portion of your grade. Completing an out-of-class writing exercise means that you:

- Follow the writing prompt (For example, if the prompt asks you to write a naturalistic scene between two characters, go with a scene between two gas station attendants instead of a scene between five bumble bees and a snowman.)
- Type the exercise in standard script format (You will receive a handout that explains standard script format.)
- Turn the exercise in on time (See the section on late-work policies.)

Theater Attendance and Reflections

You are required to see three productions and to turn in a ticket stub and a one- to two-page reflection paper for each. Completing a performance reflection means that you:

- Describe aspects of the production to demonstrate that you did indeed attend the performance and pay attention
- Compare your experience of reading the play to seeing the play
- Critique production choices (Did the set design, acting style, costume choices, and so forth work for you? Or would you have made different choices in light of your understanding of the script?)
- Turn the ticket stub and reflection in on time (See the section on late-work policies.)

Two Ten-Minute Plays

You will complete and turn in a draft of one ten-minute play in the middle of the semester and another ten-minute play toward the end of the semester. Completing a ten-minute play means that you:

- Bring six copies of a completed first draft (typed in standard script format) to class on your assigned workshop day
- Listen carefully to the workshop reading of your play and to the following feedback
- Take notes on the feedback you receive in class
- Respond respectfully to questions and feedback when it is your designated time to speak
- Turn one copy in to me on time (See the section on late-work policies.)

Two Ten-Minute Play Revisions and Reflection Papers

You will revise each of your ten-minute plays based on my feedback and the feedback of your fellow students. Along with each revised draft, you will turn in a reflection paper articulating why you made the revisions you did. Completing a revision means you:

- Turn in a draft that has changed since the first draft and that reflects some of the feedback you received
- Turn in the draft on time (See the section on late-work policies.)

Completing a revision reflection paper means you:

- Describe the feedback you applied to your revised draft, how you applied it, and why
- Describe any other major changes you made and why
- Evaluate your revised draft in comparison to your first draft
- Turn in the reflection on time (See the section on late-work policies.)

CLASSROOM POLICIES

Late Work

In theater and in life, time is of the essence. The practice of completing work by a given deadline will help you whether you pursue theater or you never touch a play again. Therefore, if you turn in late work, you will not earn full credit unless there is a special circumstance—for example, a personal emergency—that prevents you from completing your work on time and for which you have documentation. Please contact me regarding any special circumstances.

Attendance and Tardiness

As noted earlier, active engagement is key in theater and in a workshop course, so attendance and arriving on time to class are critical. I recognize, however, that you have a life beyond our classroom and that sometimes that life can be hectic and challenging. Therefore, you are allowed **one unexcused absence**—no questions asked. An unexcused absence is any absence for which you cannot provide documentation. To earn the credit your work and participation merit, you must not exceed one unexcused absence.

Excused absences are those for which you can provide documentation—for example, a doctor's note or a note from your advisor verifying an emergency. Excused absences include—but are not limited to—illness, personal or family emergencies, and observance of a religious holiday.

If you know you are going to miss a class, please let me know in advance.

Tardiness is defined as showing up to class more than five minutes late. Three tardies equal one unexcused absence. Arriving late to class can be disruptive, just as arriving late to a theater performance can distract other audience members. Please show respect to your peers by arriving on time.

Electronic Devices

Unless you are using an electronic device to access a reading that we are discussing, please do not use cell phones, computers, or other electronic devices during class. Again, theater is about engaging with a community in the present moment, and use of electronic devices unrelated to class will prevent you from being present with and for your community of peers.

Food/Drink

You may bring food and beverages to class, but please avoid anything messy, loud, or otherwise distracting. Please appropriately discard all trash before leaving the classroom.

CMU Policy on Academic Integrity

Plagiarism is defined as the use of work or concepts contributed by other individuals without proper attribution or citation. Unique ideas or materials taken from another source for either written or oral use must be fully acknowledged in academic work to be graded. *Please see your handbook for the complete policy.*

This course asks you to think and write creatively, and the output should be your own synthesis of ideas, observations, and experiences. **Plagiarism is serious business that can lead to disciplinary action, so please respect yourself and your peers by ensuring that all of your work is your own original creation.**

Disability Accommodations

If you have a documented disability that requires an accommodation, please contact me so we can set up an appointment to discuss your needs. I will make every effort to accommodate the needs of students with documented disabilities.

If you feel that you require an accommodation for a disability but you have not yet completed the appropriate documentation, please contact Disability Resources access@andrew.cmu.edu or 412-268-2013 as soon as possible.