City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

2019

ENG 302 Playwriting Workshop

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Hillary Miller
OER Assignment #1

ENG 302: Playwriting Workshop

Learning Objectives

Students in this workshop will:
- Understand the foundational elements of dramatic writing.
- Identify, analyze, and compare thematic and structural aspects of playwriting.
- Learn about stage storytelling practices, strategies, and techniques.
- Practice close reading and analysis of play texts and essays about dramatic writing.
- Collaborate with peers through shared work, open discussion, and feedback.
- Revise writing based upon peer critiques and collaborative feedback.
- Cultivate the habits and discipline of a regular writing routine.
- Incorporate various perspectives on the aesthetic, political, technical, meta-dramaturgical choices of playwrights.

How do discipline-specific objectives and objectives for digital literacy support each other?

The work of a playwriting class is often collaborative, and digital tools can facilitate (or hinder) that collaboration and sharing. To rely on digital resources that are open and easily shared hopefully reinforces objectives related to digital literacy; students are not just passively downloading files, but learning how to be discerning and engage meaningfully with each other's writing. A good description of this is found in the DeRosa and Robinson article: "Instead of thinking of knowledge as something students need to download into their brains, we start thinking of knowledge as something continuously created and revised" (117). One of the key objectives of the course requires students to take an active role in cultivating their discipline as writers, and to see their creative output as constantly subject to revision. Encouraging students to employ judgement and discernment in their digital engagement is closely aligned to their objectives as readers, writers, and peers in the course.

Additionally, the emphasis on revision underscores every objective of ENG302; the course builds in opportunities for students to "revise" their playwriting throughout the semester, and if they can conceptualize their relationship with digital tools through the same lens, that would support the objectives of digital literacy, as well. The concepts of reuse, remixing, and revision, comes up frequently in 302; there is a unit of the course entitled "remixing," which uses playwright Charles Mee's "(re)making project" to raise questions about notions of originality in dramatic writing, and tasks them to remix public domain texts into a new collage play. The objectives of this unit closely mirror some of the objectives of digital literacy, though not explicitly—it reorients questions of ownership into the sphere of cultural creation. This is just one example of how the eight essential elements (cultural, cognitive, constructive, communicative, confidence, creative, critical, civic) of digital literacies defined in the reading overlap with the essential elements circulating through the course objectives of the playwriting workshop.

Hillary Miller
OER Assignment #2

After looking through the existing repositories for Open Educational Resources, it was surprising to see that there is a distinct lack of resources specifically looking at playwriting and dramatic analysis. Many of these existing repositories do not list Theatre as a separate subject, and instead have one category for Humanities or Fine Arts (sometimes not even that). The materials appear to be very STEM (and occasionally History of Political Science)-focused. The repository with the most plentiful Theatre resources was Merlot; OER Commons also had a good number, but it casts a broader net and includes things like lecture notes alongside digital images from the Library of Congress. It would probably be possible to create a resource focused on playwriting or dramatic writing using some amalgam of the open access texts there, although on first look, it would take some time to separate out the quality OER materials from the less rigorous materials. To some degree, I already fill these gaps by making published plays (and book chapters) available through Blackboard.

As an experiment, I sent an email to the listservs of two of my professional organizations—ASTR and ATDS—to ask if anyone recommended any teaching resources (especially open access texts or script repositories) for playwriting classes. I mentioned in my email that I had already searched what I believe to be the primary OER databases (OpenStax, OER Commons, SUNY, UNM), but that all are low on playwriting (and theatre/drama/performance in general).

The responses were instructive—a number of people clearly didn't understand my email, and, even though I specified that I was looking for open educational materials, I received links to books about playwriting on Amazon. One person emailed me with a list of databases that have full plays, but not ones to which QC subscribes—from what I know, QC does not have the Alexander Street subscriptions (Black Drama and North American Indian Drama) that include play texts. More than one person suggested I use the play index for *American Theatre*-https://www.americantheatre.org/play-index. This was a great resource, as I didn't realize they had an index of all the plays they've published—I usually find plays published in *American Theatre* by searching by playwright. I'm assuming, however, that while it would be fine to post these on Blackboard, having them on a public course site, or as part of an open access text, would be infringement.

Someone did send me a link to an open theatre history textbook, one that I had come across in one of the OER repositories, but it is much more of a "Theatre Appreciation" textbook. This is great to know about—Intro to Theatre textbooks are often pricey and the courses are given so frequently in so many departments that it makes sense that it already exists in the world!

https://opensourcetheatretextbook.wordpress.com

I had never heard of this, as I don't teach Shakespeare, but it's a great resource if I ever do: http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/.

Someone else mentioned I look at William Archer's *Play-Making,* available through HathiTrust. This is a very old playwriting book, from 1912, and I don't know that many people still utilize it today, but it was a great reminder of an old text that could still be useful.

Hillary Miller
OER Assignment #2

A creative responder suggested NYPL's [Musical of the Month](#) series. I don't teach musical theatre, but this person has utilized their libretti and scripts for assignments.

I also received an email reminding me of the playwrights who make many of their texts available online for free, like Young Jean Lee and Charles Mee. I've used both of their sites in the past for play texts, and it's true that they are excellent resources.

The above feels like a big mess of materials, and not a coherent answer to the query of OER materials for playwriting and dramatic analysis. But all of them could be utilized in different ways, and most do pass the accessibility test, as they present no greater barriers to access than posting scans to Blackboard does.

3. Assignment or Assignment Sequence

Building on our readings and workshops in Unit 4: Rhetoric; Unit 5: Collaboration; and Unit 6: Storytelling

- Develop an assignment or assignment sequence that makes use of the philosophies and practical skills you have cultivated so far.
- How does this assignment or assignment sequence support the learning objectives outlined in Assignment 1?

I am pasting below a draft of an assignment description that I think merges some of the ideas of digital literacy with the objectives of my playwriting workshop. I've attempted a different version of teaching radio plays in the past, but revised it here to reflect some of the collaborative tools and resources from the Storytelling section. (I have never attempted to have students record their own radio dramas, and I haven't tried out many of these tools myself, so it is very provisional.) I was directly inspired by the article from the *Times* about teaching students how to produce their own podcasts; while those are non-fiction podcasts derived primarily from interviews, most of the skills transfer directly to scripted radio dramas. This seems like a useful way to experiment with the radio drama form, which is hard to capture without having students actually try to produce a radio drama. It also presents an opportunity to break up some of the monotony of the semester and depart from the regular structure of the playwriting workshop while engaging with some of the skills involved in digital literacy.

Assignment: Podcast/Radio Play

Your task is to write a short (5-10 minute) radio play and record it in podcast form. Before you begin, listen to the first episode of the scripted series podcast "Homecoming," from Gimlet Media (available via Apple iTunes or at https://www.gimletmedia.com/homecoming). While you listen to "Homecoming," remember to take notes on the notetaking sheet (PDF) about the production elements you notice.

Once you have done that, read BBC producer Fiona Ledger's guide to writing a radio play (PDF), and the writer's guide website for other tips. (Remember, this is different in key ways from the stage plays we have been writing!)

1. Read through the sound archive you are compiling in your playwriting notebook. Choose one of the sounds to begin your play.
2. Your play may have up to six characters, but it must follow these rules: it needs to move between at least two different geographic locations, it must incorporate at least five sounds described in your sound archive, and it must begin with one of the following lines:

   "That is my favorite dish."

   "If you can find me work."

   "What is normal?"

"We will discuss the details when we meet."

Remember: sound is all you have in a radio play—actors' voices and sound effects.

Once you have completed and workshopped your radio play script in class and received Prof. Miller's revision notes, you will invite actors to record the script with you. You can use a recording device if you own one, or you can record this script on your Smartphone:

• If you are using your phone to record, you will need to have a sound recording app on your Smartphone. On Android, download a free voice recording app like "RecForge II" or "Audio Recorder." For iPhones, in the "extras" folder, find the "Voice Memos" app.
• Make sure you know where the microphone is on your phone. (You will need to position your actors in close proximity to the microphone.) Do a few audio tests, preferably with a pair of headphones. It should be free of background sound and loud enough to hear, but not so loud that it crackles. Record for ten seconds and then play it back; adjust microphone position based on volume.
• Have at least one rehearsal with your actors before recording. When you are ready to record your final version, record in a **quiet** space.
• After you finish, make sure to enter a title (with your name and play title) for the recording and save it.
• To get the file to your computer so you can share and/or edit it, use AirDrop, Bluetooth transfer, email or Google Drive upload. Your file might be large, so be patient! Once it is complete, share it with our class Google Drive.

Optional: if you are able to achieve a good recording from one live "take," you should not need to edit your recording. However, if for some reason you need to edit your sound files—or want to add more effects—you can use GarageBand (free Apple audio editing software), Audacity, Soundtrap (free for 14 days, then premium) and Beautiful Audio Editor (all are online audio editing software that can be used on Windows or Google devices.) For each of these applications, there are tutorial videos available online.

Assignment 4. Rubric

Building on our readings and workshop in Unit 7: Assessment

- Develop a rubric for evaluating student responses to the assignment you designed in Assignment 3.
- How does this rubric reinforce the learning objectives outlined in Assignment 1?
- Does this rubric make room for productive failures or creative approaches?

I developed a rubric (see attached rubric file) to evaluate student responses to the podcast assignment I designed in Assignment #3. I divided the rubric into sections that attempted to include assessment of self-reflection with the larger project; it also sought to evenly weigh the technical elements of podcasting with the "creative" elements of the dramatic writing itself. Evaluating and assessing student playwriting is extremely difficult in any circumstance, so while I did incorporate one category that reinforced the overall learning objective of "understanding the foundational elements of dramatic writing," I also used this rubric to assess whether students were indeed "learning about other storytelling practices and techniques"— in this case, the craft of podcasting/radio dramas.

I also created a category for a "Statement of Goals and Choices" (SOGC), which I adapted from Jody Shipka's "Negotiating Rhetorical, Technological, and Methodological Difference."[i]

Statement of Goals and Choices (SOGC)

1. What, specifically, is this piece trying to accomplish— above and beyond satisfying the basic requirements outlined in the task description? In other words, what work does, or might, this piece do? For whom? In what contexts?
2. What did you try to improve, or experiment with, on this scene? How successful were you? What are the strengths? What are the weaknesses?
3. When were you most challenged? If you had three more weeks, what would you work on?
4. What specific rhetorical, material, methodological, and technological choices did you make in service of accomplishing the goal(s) articulated above? Catalog, as well, choices that you might not have consciously made, those that were made for you when you opted to work with certain genres, materials, and technologies.
5. List all the actors, human and nonhuman, that played a role in helping you accomplish the task of completing this assignment.

Shipka suggests requiring students to compose an SOGC for each text they produce over a semester. "In these statements students detail how, why, and under what conditions they made their rhetorical, technological, and methodological choices" (113). She situates the SOGC in the history of reflective documents—process narratives or letters— being used in the field of rhet/comp, in order to facilitate student participation, risk-taking, recognition of strategies to make meanings, and the awareness of production practices for certain audiences.

I decided to run with this student SOGS prompt in part because it seemed like a wonderful updating of ideas about "process writing" I'm familiar with from giants of rhet/comp field like

Peter Elbow. Shipka's writing on "Strategies of Generous Reading" put into pedagogical practice the idea that "texts are comprised of a series of rhetorical, technological, and methodological 'moves' that, taken together, simultaneously afford and constrain potentials for engaging with those texts" (112). This seems very useful for the overall digital literacy objectives embedded in the assignment. So, for example, rather than just ask a student to reflect on the strengths or weaknesses of a text, one would also inquire about challenges they faced (and/or solved) when creating it—working conditions, equipment issues, etc. This struck me as particularly important for a podcasting project because a student might be hindered by an issue with their phone's voice recorder, or perhaps the logistics of transitioning their written work to an audio format revealed surprising challenges.

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[i] Shipka, Jody. *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011, 117-118. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/qc-ebooks/detail.action?docID=2039340.

Rubric: Podcast
Professor H. Miller

	A	**B**	**C**	**D**
ORIGINALITY/ INVENTIVENESS	-Demonstrates creative ambition, originality, and execution beyond expectation -Bold artistic choices -Powerful and compelling messages/aims	-Demonstrates high levels of creative ambition, execution -Defined artistic choices -Strong messages/aims.	-Demonstrates satisfactory creative ambition, execution. -Artistic choices often unclear -Messages/aims unfocused	-Lacks idea that guides the project -Project elements are haphazard and undeveloped -Concept does not adhere to assignment guidelines
APPLICATION OF DRAMATIC CONCEPTS	-Demonstrates exemplary understanding of foundational elements of dramatic writing (including character, dialogue, mood, dramatic action, play structure, conflict)	-Demonstrates adequate understanding of foundational elements of dramatic writing	-Demonstrates poor understanding of foundational elements of dramatic writing	-Lack of application of dramatic concepts; repetitive, no recognizable setting, no development of conflict or complications, character development unclear
TECHNICAL PRODUCTION	-Podcast is polished and refined (well-rehearsed, clear delivery) -Audio quality is smooth without noisy, dead space; adequate volume or voice, music, effects	-Presentation is mostly clear; transitions and delivery mostly smooth -Minimal amount of ambient noice -Volume is acceptable	-Uneven; ambient noise is present -Volume is occasionally inconsistent -Submission lacks polish -Presentation may impede coherence of the material	-Transitions are abrupt and background noise distracting -Volume changes and other technical issues impede clarity -Technical problems affect audio
STATEMENT OF GOALS & CHOICES (SOGC)	-Fully justifies creative choices with supporting evidence -Written clearly and concisely, shows excellent command over the language -Addresses all questions	-Creative choices are justified, but could be supported more persuasively -Writing clear but requires further development	-Creative choices need to be analyzed more thoroughly and clearly -Statement does not answer key questions	-Lacks justification for creative choices -Does not respond to the process
WRITTEN MECHANICS/ FORMATTING	-No errors in spelling. Grammar, punctuation, dialogue structure is correctly formatted.	-Some errors, attempt made in style; few errors in script formatting.	-Careless errors, no proofing evident; some formatting mistakes/ missing elements.	-Errors in mechanics and formatting impede clarity; displays negligence in preparation.

ENGL 302. Playwriting Workshop

ENGL 302-01, 3 hr.; 3 cr., Prereq.: ENG 210W; Fall 2019, Wed 6:40-9:30pm
Intensive practice in the writing of plays, with related readings.

Hillary Miller, PhD   Classroom: Kiely Hall 248 | Office: *xxxx*
Email: hillary.miller@qc.cuny.edu   Office Hrs: *xxxx*

José Rivera describes good playwriting as "a collaboration between your many selves." Tony Kushner describes it as an art that "proceeds from contradiction." In this playwriting workshop, we will find our own paths to playwriting, and explore the collaborations and contradictions in writing for the stage. We will focus on the fundamental building blocks of dramatic writing, and ask a series of questions as we go: What do our characters want? How do they achieve their desires and change over time? How might our characters speak and listen to each other? Can a focus on intention, action, conflict, and image create powerful and effective playwriting? When do theatricality and imagination enter into the writing process? Can we avoid the clichés of the stage and instead find inspiration in the contradictions of the theatre?

Your energies in this class will be directed toward cultivating your craft and habits as playwrights. This will include the completion of dramatic writing prompts and generative exercises; scene and monologue writing and re-writing; aesthetic experimentation; reading scripts aloud and in performance; collaborative group writing; peer feedback; revision; and research. We will learn strategies to thoughtfully critique our own writing as well as the writing of our peers. In our reading and viewing of sample plays, we will investigate the key elements of dramatic structure and contemporary techniques of theatrical storytelling.

Course Objectives
Students in this seminar will:
• Understand the foundational elements of dramatic writing.
• Identify, analyze, and compare thematic and structural aspects of playwriting.
• Learn about stage storytelling practices, strategies, and techniques.
• Practice close reading and analysis of play texts and essays about dramatic writing.
• Collaborate with peers through shared work, open discussion, and feedback.
• Revise writing based upon peer critiques and collaborative feedback.
• Cultivate the habits and discipline of a regular writing routine.
• Incorporate various perspectives on the aesthetic, political, technical, meta-dramaturgical choices of playwrights.

Required readings/texts:

1. All assigned readings are available on our password-protected course blog:
   Tracey Scott Wilson, *The Buzzer*
   Annie Baker, *The Flick*
   Kristoffer Diaz, *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity*
   Ayad Akhtar, *Disgraced*
   Sheila Callaghan, *That Pretty Pretty; or, The Rape Play*
   Julia Cho, *BFE*
   Elinor Fuchs, "Some Questions to Ask a Play."
   Excerpts from: Janet Neipris, *To Be a Playwright: Writing for the Stage and Screen*

(Routledge, 2005); Stuart Spencer, *The Playwright's Guidebook* (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2002).

2. You are required to keep and maintain a **playwriting notebook**, where you will keep track of in-class writing exercises, brainstorms, random ideas, performance notes, overheard conversations. Remember to **date** every entry. These will be reviewed at the mid-point and end of the semester.

GRADE CRITERIA / ASSIGNMENTS

Participation & Peer Responses   30%
Much of this class is conducted as a workshop. You must participate in order to receive credit for participation. All students must be prepared to thoughtfully discuss the student work that is being workshopped. Two copies of your critical response must be brought to class. All assignments must be typed. The quality of your participation will be evaluated through: your respect for the views of others, your openness to sharing your work with the class, your receptiveness to feedback, your adherence to the critique structure, your focused attention during class, and your timely distribution of copies of your work. Also factored into this grade is a one-on-one writing consultation with me, to be scheduled in the second half of the semester.

Playwriting Assignments (3)   30%
Throughout the course, you will complete both in-class and out-of-class writing exercises. Each of the three out-of-class writing exercises will be workshopped with the whole class. They are due in hardcopy, in class, the day of your workshop:
- Writing assignments must be typed, in playscript format.
- You are responsible for bringing in copies of your work for each character + Prof. Miller + yourself.
- Upload the file to our class GoogleDrive

Performances   10%
Attendance at one performances of a contemporary play, which we will choose collectively and discuss in class. [Remember: save your ticket stub.]

Final Revision Portfolio   30%
Your portfolio will contain a selection of in-class and out-of-class writing assignments completed throughout the semester, along with *your* assessment of them, incorporating your revisions. A full revision portfolio assignment description will be posted to Blackboard.
POLICIES
Following the guidelines below will give you the strongest opportunities to grow as a writer and reader this semester:
- Attend every class, on time. Your contributions to our in-class workshop are integral to the functioning of our class. If you miss class more than twice during the semester, your participation grade will be in jeopardy. Three late arrivals equals one absence. Arriving more than fifteen minutes late to class or leaving class early counts as an absence.
- Organize your time outside of class efficiently to manage the work requirements of the course. Take notes while reading, and come prepared to engage the topics at hand.
- No devices. The writing technologies we work with *in class* are paper and pen. Minimize all distractions outside of course material during class time. Random internet surfing, emailing, completing work for another class, and messaging during class is a serious

breach of academic etiquette, and your in-class participation grade will suffer if you engage in these practices.

- No food in class.
- All writing assignments are due in hardcopy. You are responsible for bringing in one copy of your work for each character. This is a zero-cost textbook class, so I expect that arranging to have copies across the semester will not present a burden; please speak with me if you anticipate issues.
- Your assignments should be submitted in playscript format. If you prefer not to format in Microsoft Word, Final Draft and Scrivener are good programs for scriptwriting. There are some free programs available for download as well (Celtx, Story Touch, Adobe Story, Plotbot, Dubscript, Trelby).
- Meet all due dates for written work. If you are not prepared the day your writing will be workshopped, you will receive a zero for that assignment.
- My walk-in, open door office hours are Tuesdays 1:00-3:00pm. If you are not available during these hours, please request an appointment at another time to discuss any issues or questions. Every student is required to meet with me once during the semester.
- Communicate with me about issues related to the course.
- Approach our work with the habits of mind critical for success: intellectual curiosity, openness to new ideas, critical engagement, and creativity.
- Present original work. **Plagiarism** is a serious breach of academic integrity, and will result in a failing grade on the assignment. What is plagiarism? The act of claiming someone else's work as your own. This could include copying a paper word-for-word, or "patchwork" plagiarism, which involves taking passages from sources and pasting them into your writing without quotes or citations. (When in doubt, cite any ideas/information that did not originate with you.) Always feel free to contact me via email, in person, or in the notes of your writing, if you are confused. **Anything you submit to me comes with your pledge that the work is your own.**

Email & Communication
I check email frequently during regular business hours (M-F, 9am-5pm), and try to be speedy in responding to emails (within 24-48 hours on weekdays). Questions that involve lengthy discussions should be addressed after class or during office hours. I do not discuss grades via email; please schedule an appointment to do so. Include your name and class in email correspondences, as well as a subject heading. When contacting me in advance to set up an appointment, please include a few options for available times. If you are emailing with an unusually time-sensitive request, please indicate that in your subject heading.

Accessibility
It is college policy to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities.
The Office of Special Services for Students with Disabilities, 171 Kiely Hall (718-997-5870) was created to make sure that students with disabilities have access to resources that will support their success at Queens College. (All discussions will remain confidential.) If you have met with a counselor there already, please notify me of all officially granted accommodations. Regardless of documentation, however, it is my goal to make this class as accessible as possible, and I ask students to discuss with me any accommodations that will help you best access the course resources, materials, and assignments.

SCHEDULE

*(*Subject to Change)*

Date		READING DUE	WRITING DUE
8/28	Course Introduction Syllabus review; José Rivera, "36 Assumptions About Writing Plays"; Discussion of contemporary performance requirement **Action/Urgency** Conflict Exercise 1: The Lemon & the Knife	Watch: Working in the Theatre: Playwrights, "Playwrights Series: Process," American Theatre Wing	
9/4	Introduction to the Liz Lerman Feedback Method **Conflict** Exercise 2: Tangible/Intangible	Wilson, *The Buzzer* Fuchs, "Some Questions to Ask a Play."	Purchase notebook, print early readings, establish your writers' desk; begin a sound archive: record 5 sounds you hear every day; choose **three top** choices for new plays to see as a class this semester.
9/11	**Characters & Their Wants** Character Exercises: Imaginative Seeing; Past, Present, and Future (Monologues)	Ayad Akhtar, *Disgraced*	Begin Neipris' "Three Exercises in Character Development" (p. 41-42)
9/18	Workshop Assignment #1		Peer responses due
9/25	Workshop Assignment #1		Peer responses due
10/2	**Inspiration** Seed Exercises: Seed Image / Seed Music	Diaz, *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity;* Neipris, "Character"	Continue "Three Exercises in Character Development"; bring one contemporary photojournalism image (from a newspaper, or printed from the web); send Prof. Miller a link to an mp3 of a song that has a specific meaning to you.

10/9	**No classes scheduled**		
10/16	**Classes follow Monday schedule**		
10/23	**Disrupted Ritual**	Callaghan, *That Pretty Pretty;* "Home Bases: The Most Intimate Spaces of All"	
10/30	**Beginnings/Endings** (& return to stakes & conflict)	Cho, *BFE*	
11/6	Workshop Assignment #2		Peer responses due
11/13	Workshop Assignment #2		Peer responses due
	Required: Schedule a writing consultation with Prof. Miller	*(& bring notebook to meeting)*	
11/20	**Dialogue**	Baker, *The Flick;* Neipris, "Dialogue: The Ways Our Characters Speak to Us"	Café exercise
11/27	**Rewriting/Revision** Dramaturgy pairwork	Listen to "Homecoming"; Neipris, "Rewriting"; Spencer, "Rewriting" Watch the American Theatre Wing video, "Dramaturg"	Dramaturgy pairwork; remix public domain exercise
12/4	Workshop Assignment #3		Peer responses due
12/11	Workshop Assignment #3 Final readings & portfolio review		Peer responses due
	Final Exams: Revision Portfolio due		