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Writing Intensive Courses in Theatre

Alisa Roost

Most professors believe writing matters. Through writing our students are better able to synthesize ideas, communicate those ideas, and make connections across fields. While it can take significant time to grade all the assignments, it can threaten coverage of material, and our students rarely appreciate it, writing assignments can be crafted to reduce grading, add depth to coverage, and spark interest. What follows is an overview of how I incorporate writing into my theatre courses and some ways of crafting engaging writing-intensive courses.¹

In designing writing-intensive courses, theatre professors need to analyze the learning styles, strengths, and weaknesses of theatre majors. For example, many theatre students are extroverted and perceiving, according to Myers-Briggs indicators; they are outgoing, quick thinkers, generally charismatic, and many are truly talented.² Better at improvising than many students, they generally procrastinate more than the average student population, as they are energized by last-minute deadlines. They often value inspiration over pre-planning, organizing, and revising. Theatre students enjoy that last-minute rush session when they may be far less critical of their own work. They need to learn technique, which many of them avoid through their creativity and improvisation, so that they have a strong foundation when inspiration does not strike. Theatre professors need to emphasize structure and revision and create several stages of major assignments, like proposals, outlines, and drafts so that students have multiple deadlines, thus avoiding a semester-long procrastination. We may also better engage our students if we combine creative and analytical work, incorporate real-world examples like grant proposals, press releases, cover letters, fundraising brochures, and e-mails to collaborators, and supplement more traditional assignments with a specific audience like an artistic director, casting agent, or producer.

Many theatre majors are not particularly motivated by grades. Some of them have had serious disagreements with their families because of their choice of major, and their GPA won't affect their careers. Many believe their talent is all they need, and that academic classes detract from the training and experience of their acting, directing, or design courses. While production classes will rarely be writing intensive, a few writing assignments in such classes can cultivate students' interest in writing.

Finally, many of our students have a romantic view of artists. While most people know intellectually that good writing includes rewriting, many people

feel that, like Mozart in *Amadeus*, a real artist is inspired by a muse and then writes symphonies without erasing a note. Some students feel that revising is almost an admission of their failure as artists. It is important to address this issue, showing students drafts of song lyrics and of our own work, for example, or discussing directorial and play revisions, so they see that “real artists” also revise. We also need to emphasize that good writing is a skill people learn, not an inveterate character trait.

Finally, it is important to honor creativity and intuition as part of the academic process. I encourage students to write character letters (written in character to other characters), non-structured journals, and “morning pages” (three pages of handwritten thoughts first thing in the morning, which Julia Cameron strongly advocates in *The Artist’s Way*) as a way of supporting and sparking the creative process. I never grade these assignments, but at the end of the semester I ask students to analyze their strengths and weaknesses or their creative process based on reviewing their journals or morning pages.

Assignments

Assignments generally fall into “high-stakes” assignments—a single assignment that has a large impact on a final grade—and “low-stakes” assignments—numerous smaller assignments where no single assignment has a measurable impact on the final grade. For all assignments I prefer that students write as part of their homework and then we use class time for peer response.

Low-Stakes Assignments

The advantage of many techniques developed by the writing across the curriculum movement (which advocates teaching writing in all disciplines rather than just English courses) comes from structuring courses with writing that is an interaction of ideas rather than a final product to be corrected. Low stakes assignments help demystify the writing process, encourage experimentation with form and content, and can serve as a foundation for longer pieces. They also help students keep track of creative ideas and honor their intuition. Using small writing assignments to structure the course allows me to push students to keep up with the reading without putting me in the constant role of taskmaster. Of course, I continually work to motivate the students, but the emphasis shifts towards students exchanging ideas and away from graded quizzes. Writing becomes vital when students interweave their understandings of course content with current interests to explore the specific goals of the course.

In practice-based courses I design assignments to guide students in analyzing their creative processes. In a beginning acting course, for example, I want students to develop confidence and specific vocal and physical warm-ups that address their individual needs in a variety of situations. When students create their own warm-ups and justify them in writing, they better articulate how their individual voices and bodies work. Writing thus combines intuitive and analytical approaches. In directing, goals include developing a collaborative managerial

style that works well for them and explaining their visions/concepts to a variety of audiences. Assignments include memos to designers laying out how they want the design elements to work together, director's notes for the audience, a mini-grant proposal for a non-theatre funder, and a press release.

In reading-intensive courses, I generally assign either a one-page typed paper once a week, or a reading journal, with 1–3 paragraphs due for each reading. “Reading journals” provide structure for reading-intensive courses. Because these journals motivate students to complete the reading on time, I use them to replace quizzes. Students often have less resistance to writing a reading journal than a more formal essay. I give very clear instructions as to my expectations and an example of a response.

In script analysis I use journals to solicit students' immediate responses to the play and then elicit a more critical reaction that is grounded in their initial impression. The assignment reads:

Read the play without any distractions. *After* you are done, start with how the play affected you—did you have an emotional reaction? An intellectual one? Both? Did you start remembering something from your life? Feel an insatiable desire to listen to a particular CD? Be honest and record all your responses. Next: *How* did the play evoke that reaction? Did you root for or identify with a certain character? Want to know what happened next? Did an idea intrigue you? If you were bored, why didn't the play engage you? How could it have engaged your interest? While your first response is important, a journal entry cannot consist only of your initial responses.

In this course, I also assign writings linked to the process of staging plays, with students in groups that include a director, designers, a playwright, and others to complete writing activities that mirror the collaborative process of production.

When teaching theatre history, I encourage students to analyze the relationship of theatre to society and to engage with history as a living vibrant conversation. Looking at that history challenges them to think and dream about what that relationship could look like for their own work. I emphasize that history is a conversation with different ways of viewing the same event and assigning meaning. My history course includes these writing prompts:

The journal is a chance for you to respond to the readings the way historians generally respond to new ideas—messily. I do not look at sentence structure, spelling, or grammar. I do look for clear evidence that you have read and thought about the readings. You do NOT need to address every question for every entry—they are to help when you are stuck, not to dictate your reactions. *For a play*: Why did this play happen in this place and time? What does it mean about the relationship between theatre and society that these issues are prevalent at this moment? *For an article*: What is the author's argument? What is the role of theatre in that society? Does it make you reassess your own views about theatre's importance and how theatre relates to society today?

By changing writing prompts throughout the semester, I can encourage students to focus on specific course themes. When students write every week and read

each other's work, they start to see the interactive and collaborative elements of a discipline and are less intimidated by larger assignments.

Finally, I also use writing to introduce complex ideas. For example, in my script analysis course (for first year students), I want students to understand genres as artificial, ideological constructs that govern creation and perception. First, the entire class brainstorms all the different kinds of genres (including those on television). Then small groups rewrite the same basic scene (like a brother and sister meeting at an airport) according to the different genres. I encourage inclusion of the reality-show genre as the "confessional," where the participants talk directly to the camera/audience about the other participants. Students always use this device, and it clearly illustrates the artificial structure of the genre. After the students perform the scenes for each other, we discuss how the genres influenced the writing of each scene and how they identified each genre. This activity creates a strong foundation for understanding genre.

High-Stakes Assignments

When crafting larger assignments I work to pique students' interest and offer unusual combinations, and I specify an audience, which reduces plagiarism and makes it more interesting for both the students and me. "A five-page essay on Greek theatre" will be rife with internet temptations. By contrast, it is harder for students to plagiarize:

As a wealthy Athenian, you have been given the honor of sponsoring this year's Festival Dionysia. Write a letter to the Greek Senate about your experience producing the festival, what the shows looked like, who was involved in the production and who was in the audience. What civic function did the festival serve? Is that function strong enough to justify continued public funding? You must use historical facts to back up your opinion.

By combining disparate ideas, specifying an audience, or throwing a creative spin on the assignment, the teacher can encourage original work.

Adding either creative or real-world elements also increases students' interest. The results of this take-home midterm pleased and excited the students and me:

You are designing a World Cultural Center, akin to the one proposed by the Think Architectural Team to replace the World Trade Center, for Constantinople in 1400 CE. You chose Constantinople to emphasize both Asian and European theatre. Colleagues will be developing the art, literature, and music elements. What will you propose for theatre sections? This design is not yet finished, so you can have between 3 and 7 sites. It is huge, so don't worry about size. What are the interconnections that you would make between the varied theatre spaces and also between the art and music exhibits? How does that mirror the interconnections in theatre history?

One successful assignment combined script analysis with student's personal interests and a specific audience for the paper:

Your favorite regional theatre is doing your favorite play (that you haven't studied). You write the artistic director to convince her that you should be involved in it as an actor, director, or designer. Your proposal is a three to five page analysis highlighting your understanding of the play. Like any professional, you will include a cover letter to the artistic director introducing your analysis. The cover letter is the place for your enthusiasm regarding the play itself; the proposal should focus on your analysis and how you would approach the play.

Encouraging students to express their enthusiasm in the separate cover letter has strengthened their analysis. In response to this assignment, one student commented: "This assignment is probably one of the most interesting assignments I have had to do in a long time. It seems like in college you don't always get to write about stuff you love. I really feel that this paper is probably the best one I have written." Finally, I carefully break down the larger high-stakes assignments into smaller tasks, emphasizing creativity and research at the beginning, moving to structure, and finishing with grammar and syntax (see appendix).

Grading and Commenting

The biggest challenge of a writing-intensive course is grading. There is simply no way around the fact that grading is time consuming and sometimes boring. There are, however, ways of making it more interesting and quicker.

To try to reduce the stress some students associate with writing, I initially comment on low-stakes assignments with a highlighter to emphasize that I am responding to their ideas rather than correcting their grammar. I give students one week's worth of "Late Assignment Coupons" for the semester to alleviate the tension linked to writing and compensate for the increased workload. The grading is time intensive at the beginning of the term, but after the first week the students are the primary readers of these writings. (See Sargent for a detailed discussion of practical concerns linked to weekly essays for writing groups.)

I usually grade low-stakes assignments on an A/C/F or +/√/- basis. I force myself to skim. We are not English teachers, and it is not our responsibility to teach composition, but to demonstrate how students can enter dialogues and use the language of our field. If a student has grammar difficulties I expect a revision after they have visited the writing center. Student writing is a tool to explore course content in depth; it is not an end in itself. It is important to overcome the guilt that tells many faculty members that everything a student writes must be read carefully. It is more effective to have students write more and be graded less. However, the students will not take writing seriously if they know that they will receive no response. Feedback from their peers fills that void.

When using a reading journal I start every class that has reading due with students exchanging and commenting on each other's journals. Peer response for reading journals only takes about five minutes per class period, and it focuses discussions and motivates students to stay current with the reading. I have found it useful to give students length guidelines and an example of a reading journal,

both for their journals and their responses to each other. I comment on the journals in the first few weeks to clarify expectations. Allowing them use their journals on tests is a strong motivator to take good notes. I have found that students interact with the ideas in much greater depth than if they study for a quiz. It has also changed my relationship with the students because I function more as a mentor than a judge.

Peer response keeps workloads manageable, validates the students' ideas as worthwhile, and reinforces an interactive classroom. Students often care more about what their peers say regarding their writing. Peers' comments often seem more reasonable and attainable, even when they echo those of the professor. Peer response also helps students examine the elements that make good writing. The cycle of giving feedback, receiving suggestions, and revising based on those ideas improves their writing in the long run. With low-stakes assignments peer feedback focuses class discussions and also allows students to get the timely feedback they need without completely overburdening the professor.

It is important to structure student comments on their peers' papers. I have a specific list of elements to look for during each phase of writing. The questions concerning the first draft focus on what is exciting about the ideas each student is researching, how disparate ideas connect, and how a thesis and argument can be crafted. Revised draft readings examine the thesis, structure, argument, examples, engagement, and flow. For example, in terms of argument, I ask students to address the following questions.

- Are there any points where you think the author needs more examples or specifics to back up the argument?
- Is there any additional evidence you think the author should include?
- Are there any claims that you do not think the author adequately justifies?
- Are there any counter-arguments you think the author should address?
- Does the author quote sources with correct documentation?

Final draft comments can be more difficult, as student-readers are focusing on grammar and syntax and student-writers are more attached to their writing. I tell them not to make corrections but to note where they are confused. Students are less defensive when peers say, "I'm confused," rather than, "This is grammatically incorrect."

For grading, I include a specific rubric clarifying what I expect for any grade so students know exactly how they will be evaluated. For example, "An 'A' paper is superb. The writer pulls the reader in with a compelling and intelligent argument. While there may be a couple of mistakes, the work is polished. The author draws on lectures, readings (which are mentioned with correct citations), additional research, critical thinking, and his or her own interests." This explanation saves time and makes grading more consistent. I comment on drafts and grade final revisions. I do not comment on the final version unless the student requests comments.

By mentoring instead of correcting, the professor can limit the time spend on grading and expand students' role in revision. Students are more sophisticated about their work than we sometimes realize, as this comment a student wrote on an accompanying cover letter indicates: "This is by no means an exceptional paper. It's probably not even considered a good paper . . . I thought it would be easy to pump out, but discovered that I was just disappointed with my work. The consistency is fuzzy . . . I change my purpose . . . I could try to bullshit and claim it as a stroke of genius, but who would I be kidding anyways?!" Don't explain everything that is wrong. I use Peter Elbow's squiggly lines under a sentence or along the side of a paragraph to note when something is "crunchy" (my all purpose word for grammatical and syntactical problems). Usually marking a squiggly line is more effective than a correction because the student has to figure out what is wrong, rather than just type in your line edits. It also saves substantial time. If you make grammatical comments, limit your feedback to two or three error groups, for students can have difficulty processing more. Correct the first page or so, show a student where they correctly navigated that syntactical problem, and then have the student revise the rest of the writing.

Students can choose their own high-stakes assignments to avoid boredom from the writers and readers. I find it much less exhausting to read thirty papers on a variety of subjects than thirty versions of the same assignment. In a recent theatre history course, final projects included a proposal for overhauling state theatre history standards in the seventh through ninth grades, a play of Sir Francis Bacon's suit against William Shakespeare (with specific historians testifying), and a variety of engaged and interesting traditionally structured papers. Overall, I enjoyed reading and responding to the assignments.

Writing is one of the best tools we have to develop student-centered, active learning courses that combine critical thinking, student passion, and specific content into well-structured, exciting courses. By creatively developing assignments and strategies for feedback, professors can structure courses that meet their goals and minimize grading demands. Writing can deepen students' learning experiences, encourage their intellectual analysis, develop discipline for fulfilling obligations, support their creativity, and provide a foundation for meaningful work in the theatre and out.

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Appendix: Stages for Term Paper³

For this class, you will need to write a term-paper answering some question about theatre from Indian theatre through the English Restoration.

Research Proposal: Due 3–4 weeks into the term. This is the time to mix everything up—what do you take for granted that you want to examine in a different way? This may be discombobulated, and you probably won't yet have

a thesis, because you haven't done much research. It is important that you know what interests you. Plan on clearly defining the question you want to research. Start with a hunch or an area of confusion.

Your proposal should include:

- A question that is important, interesting, controversial, and answerable.
- Do you have the access to the material needed?
- Who are three people that have analyzed this? How will your work differ?

Sounding Board/1st Draft: Due 6 weeks into the term. You are combining disparate ideas, but you may not yet have a clear thesis. What you do have is a sense of how the positions are laying out. Plan to talk in class about the reading you have done, how you are thinking about the subject and where you want to go. Due: an annotated bibliography of eight non-internet sources. (At least three of these should be books.)

Outline: Due 9 weeks into the term. After you write your first draft you need to develop your structure. You should start with a thesis and then look at what your main points are and how you will convince a reader. You should have a topic sentence for every paragraph, even those paragraphs you haven't yet written. At this point you will probably start cutting out considerable writing from your first draft.

Revised Draft: Due 12 weeks into the term. Your paper is completely written. We will be looking at paragraph and sentence structure, flow, transitions, whether your evidence proves your points, and whether all your examples are necessary.

Final Draft: Due first day of the last week of the term. Everything matters! We will be looking at spelling, punctuation, possessives, subject-verb agreement, comma-splices, lazy use of pronouns, wordiness, confusion, style, apostrophes, and everything else.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Marian Arkin and the CUNY Writing Across the Curriculum initiative for developing a series of workshops I participated in over two years. Many ideas were developed directly in these pedagogical sessions.
2. Most artists tend to be more perceiving than judging centered: "People who prefer to use their Perceiving process . . . tend to live in a flexible, spontaneous way, seeking to experience and understand life, rather than control it" (Myers 5). Theatre students tend to be more extroverted in that they "tend to focus on the outer world of people" and "prefer to communicate by talking" (Myers 4). See Bean 39–40 and 161–62 for more on Myers Briggs in the classroom.
3. These stages are adapted from Bean.

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