

**PLAYWRITING**

**ENGL 392**

Spring, 2012

Tuesdays & Thursdays 2:35-3:45pm, Arena Theatre

**INSTRUCTOR:**

Christopher Shorr

Email: cshorr@moravian.edu

Office: Arena Theatre

Office Hours: Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays 1-2:15PM and by appointment

(You are EXPECTED to meet with me during the semester on an ongoing basis. Although you are always welcome to drop by, I encourage you to call ahead to insure a spot if you know you want to see me during office hours. Office hours are subject to change. Check posting on office door for updates.)

Phone: (610) 861-1489

**REQUIRED TEXTS:**

Ball, David. Backwards & Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983.

ISBN-10: 0809311100

Carey, Alison. "A Resting Place." Re-printed with permission of the playwright.

Cervantes, Alanah. "Frankly." Re-printed with permission of the playwright.

Parisi, Barbara (Editor). The Best American Short Plays 2009-2010. New York: Applause, 2011. ISBN-13: 978-1557837608

Shorr, Christopher, and James Jordan. "The Pan Show." Re-printed with permission of the playwrights.

Sweet, Jeffrey. The Dramatist's Toolkit: The Craft of the Working Playwright. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993.

ISBN-13: 978-0435086299

***Additional texts to be assigned***

**REQUIRED LIVE THEATRE EVENTS:**

"Frankly" by Alanah Cervantes. February 2-5, 2012 at The Arena Theatre

"A Resting Place" By Alison Carey. April 12-15, 2012 location TBA

**NOTE FOR ENGLISH MAJORS:**

In preparation for creating an English Major Portfolio in your senior capstone seminar, please save both digital and hard copies of your work for this class, including copies with instructor comments.

## COURSE OBJECTIVES:

***The purpose of this course is to introduce students to the craft of Playwriting with a hands-on approach. Students will do a series of writing exercises building toward writing and revising a short script. In groups, students will workshop their plays in class, incorporating feedback into the revision process. By the end of the course, each student should have an introductory understanding of: Dramatic structure and plot; dialogue; character motivation; conflict; and the process of writing and revising a short script.***

This is a creative writing course. It demands that you write a lot. In order to generate the (approximately) 10 pages per week that you will turn in, you should plan on writing 20 pages per week that you throw away.

You will also be reading—books about reading and writing plays scripts, and the scripts themselves. You'll read a collection of short new American play scripts, you'll read scripts of plays that you'll see in performance, and you'll read the scripts that your peers are writing. You'll read your peers' scripts closely and critically, repeatedly during the process, and you'll provide feedback to assist in the revision process.

Creative writing requires creative thinking. Encourage yourself to think creatively. Follow flights of fancy. Let your mind wander. (...But not while in class or while operating heavy machinery!) Remember your dreams. Not all ideas are right for a given project. You'll need to come up with ideas, explore them, and then move on to new ideas. I encourage you to keep an idea journal. Just because an idea isn't right for a particular project, doesn't mean that it's a bad idea—it might be perfect for something in the future. Log those ideas in a journal so you can save them for later!

## CAUTIONS:

1. It is essential that you attend all classes. Students are expected to participate in class activities and contribute to class discussions of topics. ***Less than active participation*** may have a negative effect on your grade. ***More than one absence*** may have a negative effect on your grade separate from the 10% of the grade designated for Active Participation/Improvement/Commitment.
2. All work must be presented or turned in on time. Missed work may only be made up under special circumstances at the discretion of the instructor.
3. Students are expected to work hard and think creatively. The more time and opportunity you have to work on a skill and/or assignment, the greater the expectation for excellence.
4. All work turned in must be typed or printed from a printer.
5. All students must be prepared to present work and in attendance the first day of the classes designated for an assignment. Additional days are just for spill-over. (In other words, don't plan on skipping the first day of Workshops to buy yourself an extra day to work on your script!)
6. Students should expect to spend six to eight hours per week outside of class preparing for this class. Students with disabilities who believe that they may need accommodations in this class are encourage to contact the Learning Services Office as soon as possible to enhance the likelihood that such accommodations are implemented in a timely fashion.
7. There is a zero tolerance policy on plagiarism—see "Academic Honesty," below.
8. Read ahead on the syllabus to see what's coming up in order to avoid getting caught by surprise when a lot of reading, or other assigned work is due.

## **GRADING**

**Please note:** Letter grades are based on percentages and do NOT get rounded up or down. There is a range of percentage points that corresponds to a particular letter grade. In blackboard, the instructor can choose to display grades as percentages or as letters. If I choose to display grades as percentages, it is so that students can see exactly how close they are to the next grade bracket.

This may provide incentive to do better in order to push your grade up into a higher bracket, or to keep it from slipping down into a lower bracket. Do not mistake this as an invitation to argue for a higher grade. A 79.99 is NOT a B-.

90.00%+ = A range (A- through A+)

80.00%-89.99% = B range (B- through B+)

70.00%-79.99% = C range (C- through C+)

60.00%-69.99% = D range (D- through D+)

59.99% or lower = Failure to pass the course

## **BLACKBOARD:**

You MUST enroll in this class on Blackboard: <http://blackboard.moravian.edu>

## **ACADEMIC HONESTY:**

Refer to the statement on academic honesty at Moravian College in the current Student Handbook (online at: [www.moravian.edu/studentLife/handbook/academic2.htm](http://www.moravian.edu/studentLife/handbook/academic2.htm))

Copies are available in the Academic Dean's file (acdean) on the Public (P:) Drive of the Moravian Intranet.

Keep copies of all written work submitted to the instructor, as well as notes, drafts and materials used in preparing assignments. If in doubt about appropriate collaboration, proper documentation and other honesty issues, ask the instructor.

If you lift a single sentence from a website for an assignment, you will fail the assignment, and may fail the course. Students should not expect any leniency on this policy.

NOTE: Paraphrasing without citation is still plagiarism, as is stolen thought structure.

**When in doubt, cite it!**

*Students who wish to request accommodations in this class for a disability should contact Mr. Joe Kempfer, Assistant Director of Learning Services for Disability Support, 1307 Main Street (extension 1510). Accommodations cannot be provided until authorization is received from the office of Learning Services.*

*The Writing Center is located in a building that is not accessible to persons with mobility impairments. If you need the services of the Writing Center, please call 610-861-1392.*

**FINAL GRADES WILL BE DETERMINED AS FOLLOWS:**

- 25% Midterm “Exercises” Portfolio to include:
  - Dialogue exercise
  - Exposition exercise
  - Negotiation exercise
  - Conflict exercise
  - Stakes exercise
- 15% Polished exercise script (Turned in with the Midterm Portfolio, but graded separately)
  - A revised piece combining two exercises
  - Self-Assessment of revision choices
- 30% At least three drafts (first plus minimum of two revised) of short play script
- 5% Self-Assessment of revision choices
- 5% Copies of editorial critiques received from peers (not part of your grade)
- 5% Copies of your FOUR editorial critiques of peer’s play scripts
  - (critiques of both first and second drafts for each of two peers)
  - (All to be turned into together as part of the Final “Script” Portfolio)
- 10% Presentation from “Best American Short Plays”
- 10% Active Participation/Improvement/Commitment

Lest there be confusion... Excellent work will count as an “A.” Above Average work will count as a “B.” Average work will count as a “C.” Less than average work will count as a “D.” A poorly done assignment, or one that fails to adequately fulfill the requirements an assignment will count as an “F.”

The criteria for grades include originality of thought, clarity of purpose, organization, creativity, evidence of critical thinking, quality of material, expression and mechanics. Grades may be monitored on Blackboard, but keep in mind that those grades are ONLY a running total of graded assignments and that your final grade includes absences, participation, and other components not included in the Blackboard running total.

## **DESCRIPTION OF ASSIGNMENTS**

### **DIALOGUE EXERCISE**

Listen to the conversations around you. Pay attention to how people really speak. Use an audio recorder to record three, one-minute snippets of dialogue from real life. One should be one person telling a story; one should be a conversation between two people; one should be a group of more than two people. ***Transcribe each of them, assigning new character names to “protect the innocent.” For each transcription, write a brief (one paragraph) analysis of each “character” in which you make observations about the individuals based only on THE WAY THEY SPEAK in that dialogue.***

### **EXPOSITION EXERCISE**

You will do TWO VERSIONS of this exercise. Re-read David Ball’s chapter about exposition, and read ahead for Jeffrey Sweet’s chapter about exposition and expectations.

VERSION ONE: HIGH CONTEXT (see Sweet)... Two people who know each other well (high context communication) are waiting for one or two more people to arrive. At least one person is upset.

VERSION TWO: LOW CONTEXT (see Sweet)... One person is waiting for one or two more people to arrive, when a person who is not well known to the first (low context communication) arrives and waits with the first person. At least one person is upset

Come up with a scenario in which you have to communicate the following information to an audience:

- The specific relationship between the characters (new lovers, siblings, childhood friends, estranged friends, step-mother/daughter, complete strangers, service provider/client, etc.) The relationships between both the characters on stage and the character(s) for whom they are waiting should be clear.
- A big problem from the past.
- A secret they cannot tell the person/people about to arrive.
- Something hidden in one of their pockets.
- Two more pieces of information that you choose (identify clearly)

***Write TWO 5-10 page scenes with two characters in which you come up with creative, elegant ways to solve the “problem of exposition” by communicating this information to an audience without it seeming awkward or unrealistic for the characters to share the information with one another.***

***Highlight in BOLD the information that is being communicated explicitly through dialogue, and add notes about information that is being communicated in ways OTHER THAN explicitly through dialogue (ie. Stage directions, subtext, implied meaning, etc).***

### **STAKES EXERCISE**

Character A wants something from character B. Four things happen, and each of them “raises the stakes,” making character A pursue what s/he wants even more desperately. By the fourth thing, the situation should be completely urgent. ***Write a 5-10 page scene, clearly identifying each time something happens that “raises the stakes,” and why it does so. MAKE BOLD CHOICES!***

### NEGOTIATION AND TACTICS EXERCISE

Character A wants something from character B; Character B wants something from character A. What do the characters want? Affection, forgiveness, acceptance? The car keys? Money for an operation? For drugs? How do they try to get what they want? Do they tease, beg, tempt, bribe? Do they intimidate, embarrass, confess?

***Write a 5-10 page negotiation scene in which both characters change tactics multiple times until they get what they want. Clearly identify what they want and the tactics they use to try to get what they want, marking every time this changes.***

### CONFLICT EXERCISE

Character A wants something from character B; Character B refuses to allow character A to have it. Every time Character A finds a way around, over, or through one obstacle, Character B throws another obstacle in Character A's path. ***Turn in a 5-10 page scene along with a list of objectives, obstacles and conflicts.*** Remember that objectives, obstacles and conflicts are present in all drama, so this scene could be about anything from a boy asking a girl on a date, to one friend talking another out of suicide. Be creative!

### POLISHED EXERCISE SCRIPT

***Revise, expand, and combine two of your writing exercises into a 10-15 page scene. Turn in the scene and a self-assessment of your choices and revision process.*** Your scene should undergo MAJOR revision—not simply be a mash-up of two scenes. Aim high. This is your Midterm assignment, and the last project before your one-act play script!

### PRESENTATION FROM “BEST AMERICAN SHORT PLAYS”

Pick from a list of plays in Best American Short Plays 2009-10 and through an oral presentation, critique and assess the piece, explaining to the class what makes it a successful play script. Among your criteria for assessment, specifically address elements discussed in class (dialogue, structure, plot, stakes, character motivation, conflict, etc).

### SHORT PLAY SCRIPT

Beginning as early as the first part of the semester, but with work focused in the second half of the course, students will write a short 20-30 page one-act play script. The subject is entirely up to you, but there must be at least 2 and no more than 4 characters. This work should build on skills developed through the scene exercises from the first half of the course. Stretch yourself!

### SELF-ASSESSMENT OF REVISION CHOICES

In a two-page paper, discuss your own revision process. What changed in your play script? Why did you make the choices you made? What worked? What didn't work? What lessons did you learn along the way? How did you take your peer's critiques into consideration? In your own assessment, what are the strengths of your piece? What aspects remain challenging?

### EDITORIAL CRITIQUES OF PEER'S PLAY SCRIPTS

You will be reading and critiquing your peers' work. The purpose of the critique is to provide constructive, useful insights that will help your peers revise their works in progress, while at the same time honing our own sense of what makes a strong play script. Be specific. Be supportive. Be honest.

## CLASS SCHEDULE

- 1 Tuesday, January 17  
Course overview: Wrights and Writers
- 2 Thursday, January 19  
What's in a play?  
Generating ideas  
Formatting the page
- 3 Tuesday, January 24  
Identification of reading and writing groups  
Reading and understanding a script  
*Reading Due: Backwards & Forwards*  
*Due: Dialogue Exercise*
- 4 Thursday, January 26  
Reading and understanding a script  
Building blocks of drama  
Communicating Information
- 5 Tuesday, January 31  
"I'll tell you what I want!" Character Motivation  
*Reading Due: "Frankly"*  
*Due: Exposition Exercise*
- 6 Thursday, February 2  
Recipe becomes a meal; Script becomes a play  
*Reading Due: The Dramatist's Toolkit*
- 7 Tuesday, February 7  
Obstacles & Conflict  
*Due: Negotiation & Tactics Exercise*
- 8 Thursday, February 9  
Sense of Urgency: Raising the Stakes
- 9 Tuesday, February 14  
Making Choices: Action Defining Character  
*Due: Conflict Exercise*
- 10 Thursday, February 16  
Spicing it up with Theatricality  
*Due: Stakes Exercise*
- 11 Tuesday, February 21  
"Wrighting" and re-writing: The Revision Process

CLASS SCHEDULE (cont'd)

12 Thursday, February 23

Beginning, Middle and End: Spotlight on Structure

*Due: Midterm "Exercise" Portfolio—includes Polished Scene*

13 Tuesday, February 28

Sharing Polished Scenes group #1

14 Thursday, March 1

Sharing Polished Scenes group #2

SPRING RECESS—NO CLASS Tuesday, March 6 or Thursday March 8  
**(Pssst! Scripts are due next week!)**

15 Tuesday, March 13

Troubleshooting characters

16 Thursday, March 15

30 seconds or less: Identifying the central action.

Distribute First Draft of Play Script

*Due: First Draft of Play Script*

17 Tuesday, March 20

Workshop First Draft of Play Script

*Due: Editorial Critique of First Draft for peer #1 (copies to writer and instructor)*

18 Thursday, March 22

Workshop First Draft of Play Script

*Due: Editorial Critique of First Draft for peer #2 (copies to writer and instructor)*

19 Tuesday, March 27

What makes strong plays strong?

*Reading Due: Best American Short Plays*

20 Thursday, March 29

Short play reports Group #1

*Due: Short play reports*

21 Tuesday, April 3

Short play reports Group #2

*Due: Short play reports*



CLASS SCHEDULE (cont'd)

22 Thursday, April 5

Remaining Reports

Distribute Second Draft of Play Scripts

*Due: Second Draft of Play Scripts*

23 Tuesday, April 10

Workshop Second Draft of Play Scripts

*Due: Editorial Critique of second draft for peer #1 (to writer and instructor)*

24 Thursday, April 12

Workshop Second Draft of Play Scripts

*Due: Editorial Critique of second draft for peer #2 Due (to writer and instructor)*

*Reading Due: "The Bethlehem Civil War/Cemetery Project"*

25 Tuesday, April 17

Playwright's Mission: Writing plays with a purpose

Alison Carey discussion

26 Thursday, April 19

Troubleshooting Plot

Plays and screenplays

27 Tuesday, April 24

The Musical

*Reading Due: "The Pan Show"*

28 Thursday, April 26

Evaluations and review

*Final "Script" Portfolio Due*