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ENG 4764-600: Advanced Dramatic Writing

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ENG 4764: Advanced Dramatic Writing

fall 2021 / Section 600

Dr. Chris Wixson



“The creation of character is more about the adverbs than the adjectives.”
–Peter Mendelsund, *What We See When We Read*

Syllabus

course philosophy

ENG 4764 offers further opportunities to unlock the possibilities of stage storytelling, providing advanced creative practice combined with reading/discussion of contemporary American plays in order to continue to develop, diversify, sharpen, and deepen the **craft** of the playwright. Like theatre itself, the course is as invested in *process* as it is in *product* and is for the most part exercise-based rather than workshop-based. Growth occurs only through the vigorous workout of writing muscles, *creative conditioning*, precisely what this course provides.

ENG 4764 is a reading-intensive course with a schedule that requires time and attention devoted to our **full-length** scripts. The most talented and consistently interesting theatre practitioners are avid readers; careful, critical, and meaningful reading is as *vital and necessary* a skill as any in the theatre. Reading contemporary playwrights will inform and inspire your craft as well as deepen your understanding of theatre as an art form.

ENG 4764 is also writing-intensive course, designed to cultivate your craft, sharpen your creative expression, and enhance your analytical thinking. This course does not assume that everyone enrolled in it identifies as a playwright and is always populated by writers with a pretty wide range of creative experience and aspirations.

Learning Outcomes

Students completing this course will:

1. Understand and deploy the conventions, languages, and formatting of stage storytelling.
2. Demonstrate a working knowledge of dramaturgical structure and elements of the playwright's craft.
3. Read and analyze several contemporary plays with regard to their construction and dramaturgy.
4. Determine best practices for their own writing and create a series of sketches and a full script (20-25 pp.)
5. Cultivate growth in personal craft, work ethic, revision, confidence, and self-assessment.

course texts

Backwards and Forwards, David Ball; *The Dramatic Writer's Companion*, Will Dunne; *Playwriting, Brief and Brilliant*, Julie Jensen; Contemporary plays by Audrey Cefaly, Sarah DeLappe, Jackie Sibblies Drury, debbie tucker green, Taylor Mac, Dominique Morisseau, Lynn Nottage, and Sarah Ruhl.

contact information

Dr. Chris Wixson

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****I check email very frequently so please don't hesitate to contact me with questions. However, I tend to go to sleep around 9:00 PM CST. As such, if you have a question that needs answering that night, get it to me by 8:30; otherwise, your answer will be in your mailbox around 6:30 AM CST the following morning.**

office hours

DFAC 1351

TR 8:00-10:30 AM, W 12-1 PM, and by appointment

****If you are on campus, the above are my face-to-face office hours. Please let me know you are coming *in advance*; in accordance with IBHE and public health directives, *masking is REQUIRED*, and the office space will be *properly socially-distanced*.**

If you are not on campus or would prefer to meet virtually via Zoom for whatever reason, let me know, and we can make arrangements to do so at a mutually convenient time. Email too can be a good and safe way to get questions answered, feedback on your writing, and guidance during the process of assignments.

an online course in practice

The online course experience is a change from traditional face-to-face classroom learning but especially enhances creativity, self-direction, and articulate expression in writing, all **essential skills** in the professional world and in healthy artistic craft. This course may well involve slightly less reading than you expect but certainly more writing than you may be used to. The time and labor investment is the same, but their expressions will "look" different and feel more independent, as will our course schedule. All course materials (except for the TRS textbooks) will be located on D2L. We may seek opportunities *if possible* for synchronous interaction, though **never** if it will disadvantage students who do not have reliable devices/access to strong Wifi signals or who do have difficult schedules related to jobs or child/elder care. As we all navigate the challenging contours of the new normal, let's work together to make the course a meaningful experience.

class participation

ENG 4764 is an advanced creative writing course with a schedule that requires time and attention devoted solely to our work together; meaningful **PRESENCE** is essential to the success of our collaborative endeavor and your individual growth. This is an "own and hone" course (OWNING and HONING your craft as writers) and **only works if you work it**.

If you took ENG 3064 with me last spring, the structure of the course will be familiar to you. Each week, we will discuss plays (via Discussion Forum posts due on Tuesdays) and complete writing exercises (usually due on Fridays). Weekends are for reading assigned plays, pre-writing for the following week's exercise, and eventually working on your Full Play. **Success in this course hinges upon your commitment to self-directed work.**

written assignments / course grade breakdown

*Five Sketches (3-4 pages) / Sketch Reflections	25%
*A Full Script (10-12 pages, then 20-25 pages + Workshop Participation)	35%
*Ten Meaningful, Respectful Discussion Forum Posts	30%
*Two Substantive Self-Reflective Inventory Assessments (3-4 pages / 4-5 pages)	10%

a word about evaluation

The course operates on the basis of skill-based grading. Each assignment will have concrete craft objectives; evaluation will focus on the technical achievement of objectives and the efficaciousness of the writer's choices.

academic integrity

Any paper/posting with your name on it signifies that you are the author--that the wording and major ideas are yours, with exceptions indicated by either quotation marks and/or citations. Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use (appropriation and/or imitation) of others' materials (words and ideas). Evidence of plagiarism will result in one or more of the following: a failing grade for the assignment, an F in the course, and a report filed with the Student Standards Office.

late assignments

These are no fun for me to keep track of and only put you further behind. For each day beyond the scheduled due date, the assignment will be penalized a third of a letter grade. **After a week, I will no longer accept the assignment, and it becomes a "0."** If you become ill or the victim of emergency circumstances, please email me as soon as possible and stay in touch.

By maintaining your enrollment in this course, you agree to adhere to the above policies.

if you are experiencing trauma or distress

Please note that, while reading and writing can be very personal acts, this class is not a therapeutic environment and should not be taken in place of therapy. If you are experiencing personal issues, depression, anxiety, trauma, etc, your best resource is always the EIU Counseling Clinic, 1st floor of the Human Services Building, which takes walk-in appointment requests and can also be reached at 217-581-3413 during the day, and 1-866-567-2400 in case of after-hours emergency. Do not hesitate to take advantage of this resource—it's yours. As a State of Illinois employee, I'm a Mandated Reporter and must also report incidents of sexual assault or violence to our Title IX Coordinator.

special needs and situations

If you have a *documented* disability and are in need of academic accommodations, please contact the Office of Disability Services (studentdisability@eiu.edu or 581-6583) or visit McAfee 1210 as soon as possible in order to receive approval. Then please contact me as soon as possible in order to discuss arrangements.

tech support

If you need assistance with D2L, call D2L Support toll free at 1-877-325-7778. Support is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Email and Chat options are also available on the "My Home" page after logging in to D2L. Other D2L resources including a D2L Orientation course for students are available on the same page. For technical questions regarding other software, hardware, network issues, EIU NetID/password, or Panthermail, contact the ITS Helpdesk at 217-581-4357 during regular business hours or submit a help ticket at <https://techsupport.eiu.edu/>. If you have a question regarding course content, contact your instructor.



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course calendar

** Because this schedule can and probably will change, it is imperative that you access it frequently on D2L so as to note any revisions. Please get into the habit of *regularly* checking email and the D2L calendar.

** Prompts for sketches, self-inventories, and Discussion Forum posts/responses can all be found on D2L.

Week One (August 23) – The Mechanics and Physics of Dramatic Narrative

Read: Ball's *Backwards and Forwards* Part One (D2L)

Notes on Ball's Narrative Theory (D2L)

Wayth's *A Field Guide to Actor Training* pp. 34-41 (D2L)

Notes on Environment, Narrative Movement, and Character Journey (D2L)

Self-Inventory and Introduction Prompt (D2L)

****Writer Self-Inventory Due to D2L Dropbox Friday 8/27 by 11:59 PM**

****Introduction Due in Discussion Forum Friday 8/27 by 11:59 PM**

Select a short piece from your non-dramatic writing to deliver aloud as a character. A poem works well, in which you take on the speaker's persona. You can also select an excerpt from a piece of short fiction that features a sharply defined narrator. Endow the speaker/narrator with an objective (a goal of getting the audience to specifically to think/feel/do something specific) and an obstacle to achieving that goal. Employ specific tactics of voice and movement to try and overcome the obstacle. Then choose a **different objective and obstacle and deliver the same piece a **second** time.

****Upload the completed video to the D2L Dropbox Friday 8/27 by 11:59 PM**

Week Two (August 30) –

Read: Jensen's *Playwriting: Brief and Brilliant* pp. 1-37; 51-55; 56-57

"Collaborative Character Building" Exercise Prompt (D2L)

"Sketch Reflection Prompt" (D2L)

****All "Collaborative Character Building" Contributions Due to Discussion Forum Tuesday 8/31 by 11:59 PM**

****"Collaborative Character" Sketch and Sketch Reflection Due Friday 9/3 by 11:59 PM**

Week Three (September 6)

Read: green's *Hang* (D2L)
"Discussion Forum Prompt" (D2L)
"Found Situation" Sketch Prompt (D2L)

Write: **Discussion Forum Post #2 Due Tuesday 9/7 by 11:59 PM**

****"Found Situation" Sketch and Sketch Reflection Due to D2L Friday 9/10 by 11:59 PM**

Week Four (September 13)

Read: Cefaly's *Alabaster* (D2L)
Write: **Discussion Forum Post #3 Due Tuesday 9/14 at 11:59 PM**

****"Emotional Reversal" Sketch and Sketch Reflection Due Friday 9/17 by 11:59 PM**

Week Five (September 20)

Read: Nottage's *Sweat* (D2L)
Write: **Discussion Forum Post #4 Due Tuesday 9/21 by 11:59 PM**

****"Comings and Goings" Sketch and Sketch Reflection Due Friday 9/24 by 11:59 PM**

Week Six (September 27)

Read: Drury's *Really* (D2L)
Write: **Discussion Forum Post #5 Due Tuesday 9/28 by 11:59 PM**

****"Spoken Subtext" Sketch and Sketch Reflection Due Friday 10/1 by 11:59 PM**

Week Seven (October 4)

Read: Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (D2L)
Lavey's "On *Dead Man's Cell Phone*" (D2L)
Write: **Discussion Forum Post #6 Due Tuesday 10/5 at 11:59 PM**
Select: Sketch for Expansion

*****Vision Statement for Sketch Expansion Due Friday 10/8 by 11:59 PM**

Week Eight (October 11) – Writing Week

Read: Notes on Revision and Expansion (D2L)

****Sketch Expansion (10-12 pages) and Expansion Reflection Due Friday 10/15 by 11:59 PM**

To revise "is to *listen*, above all; to hear past the emotional filters that distort the sound of our all too human words; and to then make choices rather than judgements." –Susan Bell

Week Nine (October 18) – Intensive Main Character Work

Read: DeLappe's *The Wolves* (D2L)
Dunne pp. 3-7; 10-19 ("Character")

Write: **Discussion Forum Post #7 Due Tuesday 10/19 at 11:59 PM**

****Complete and Submit the Three "Personal Inventory and Past Tense" Questionnaires for your Main Character (pp. 4-7 in the Dunne) by Friday 10/22 at 11:59 PM. Skip questions that have no impact on the story and feel free to include answers to questions that appear on pp. 10-19 if they are essential. HOWEVER, seriously consider EVERY question since it might lead to an unexpected discovery that will impact/augment the character or the story.**

Week Ten (October 25) – Intensive Character Work

Read: Morisseau's *Blood at the Root* (D2L)
Dunne pp. 24-26; 93-117; 123-127 ("Scene")

Write: **Discussion Forum Post #8 Due Tuesday 10/26 at 11:59 PM**

****Complete and Submit the "Defining Trait, Its Roots and Effects" Exercise (pp. 24-26), the Twelve "Present Tense" Questions (pp. 94-96), and the "First and Second Strategy" Questions (pp. 125-126) for your Main TWO Characters by Friday 10/29 at 11:59 PM. Again, be open to unexpected discoveries rather than simply looking to confirm what you think you already know.**

Week Eleven (November 1) – Intensive Mechanics and Physics Work

Read: Dunne pp. 223-234; 265-279 ("Story" and "Arc")

****Complete and Submit the Twelve "Dramatic Journey" Questions (p. 226) and the Ten "Opening 10 Pages" Questions (pp. 229-233) by Friday 11/5 at 11:59 PM.**

Week Twelve (November 8) – Writing Week

Read: Taylor Mac's *Hir* (D2L)
Dunne pp. 306-310 ("Six Steps of Revision")
Jensen pp. 62-67 ("The Rewrite")

Write: **Discussion Forum Post #9 Due Tuesday 11/9 at 11:59 PM**

Continue to Develop and Shape the 20-25 page Draft of *Complete Script

Week Thirteen (November 15) – Writing Week

Read: "Preparing your Drafted Script" (D2L)

***Full Draft of *Complete Script* (including Writer's Statement) and Full Draft Reflection
Due Friday 11/19 by 11:59 PM**

HAPPY THANKSGIVING BREAK!!!!

Week Fourteen (November 29) – Small Group Workshop

Read: Script Drafts from Group Members

Send: List of Questions (Step 3 *ONLY*) to Author via email attachment Friday 12/3 by 11:59 PM

Submit: “Nine Tasks” Observation Data and List of Questions (Steps 2 and 3) due to D2L dropbox Friday 12/3 by 11:59 PM

Week Fifteen (December 6) – Planning, Pitching, and Revising

Submit: Revision Plan due to D2L dropbox by Tuesday 12/7 by 11:59 PM

“Elevator Pitch” due to Forum Friday 12/10 by 11:59 PM

**Revised Final Version of Complete Script and Self-Reflective Assessment due to D2L Wednesday, December 15th by 11:59 PM*