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ENG 2005-001: Beginning Playwriting

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English 2005-001: Beginning Playwriting  
Spring, 2001  

SYLLABUS  

INSTRUCTOR: John Kilgore. Office: 314K Coleman Hall, EIU. Hours: MW 11-3, TR 2-4. Phone: 581-6313 (office), 345-7395 (home). E-mail: cfjdk@eiu.edu. Please feel free to call my home at reasonable hours. When leaving voice mail at the office, include date and time of call, and do not trust voice mail for urgent messages—try me at home instead.  

REQUIRED TEXTS:  
Catron, Writing, Producing, and Selling Your Play  
Cerf, Thirty One-Act Plays  
McNamara, Plays from the Contemporary American Theatre  
Thomas, Best American Screenplays  

COURSE REQUIREMENTS: regular class attendance and participation; assigned readings in the texts; very careful reading of work by other students; help interpreting and staging scripts by your classmates; one group project; several assigned exercises; one 75-minute exam; one one-act play or screenplay, submitted in installments, partially staged and critiqued by the group, finally submitted in revised form. With luck the exercises will help generate the final script, and you are welcome to incorporate material from the one into the other. The basis for the final grade will be approximately as follows: installments of play - 15%; final script - 30%; exercises - 25%; exam - 15%; attendance and participation - 15%.  

ATTENDANCE POLICY. Attendance and participation are crucial in this course, and the grading policy will reflect this. I will take attendance (by means of a sign-up sheet) every session. The resulting record, adjusted slightly for the quality of your class participation, will be used to figure a participation grade equal to about 15% of the final grade for the course. Scale for the participation grade: 0-1 absences = A, 2 = B, 3 = C, 4 = D, 5 = F. 6 or more—continuing, proportional grade penalties (the attendance grade will become a negative number, averaged into your overall course grade). The effect of this formula, by design, is that perfect or near-perfect attendance will be handsomely rewarded, whereas chronic absenteeism will make it impossible for you to pass the course.  

Note that you have 1-2 “free” absences. Use these if you have to, but otherwise keep them as insurance. I will listen sympathetically to excuses, but I will not normally award attendance credit for any session you have missed. In truly exceptional circumstances, however, I MAY be willing to assign make-up work—difficult, challenging make-up work—for attendance credit. (Hint: It’s easier just to be here. Honest.) Note: it is your responsibility to find and sign the attendance sheet at each session, to obtain permission for make-ups (if any), and to double-check with me to see that the make-ups have been duly credited.  

READING is not extensive, but should be done with care. Try to visualize what you read with special intensity, and ask yourself at every point why the playwright makes particular choices regarding character, action, and scene. Putting yourself in the author’s place in this way can be a vital preliminary to writing plays of your own. An exam in Week 10 will test your knowledge of all assigned readings.  

EXERCISES are creative projects that try to a) drill you in fairly specific skills; b) stimulate ideas for your one-act play. Effort and care spent on the exercises are likely to pay dividends later on. The schedule below lists only titles and due dates for each exercise. Some of the due dates will probably change, so be alert for such announcements, and always feel free to ask whether the printed deadline remains in force.  

Note that the exercises include a play or movie review, due in Week 13. Make plans early to see at least one play or movie you will enjoy reviewing. Guidelines for the review are given in Week 11 of the schedule, but you can really do this any time before Week 13. See Weeks 11 and 13, below.  

WORKBOOK: Please keep for this class, and bring to each meeting, a simple, two-pouch folder in which you keep your exercises. New exercises go on the right, in chronological order, earliest to latest; older, graded work may be stored on the left, together with drafts as space permits. I will often, with little or no
notice, invite the class to share old or new work from the workbooks; be sure to have yours with you so you can take advantage of such moments.

In regard to my grading of the workbooks, please note the following:

- Keep up to date with the exercises, as I may give no more than one class meeting's notice before picking up the workbook.
- All assignments must be typed (i.e., computer-printed) and, if they run to more than a page, paginated.
- All assignments MUST include your name, a date, and a heading taken from the syllabus (e.g., "Exercise #3, Group Project.")
- Make sure that work to be graded AND NOTHING ELSE is in the right-hand pouch of your workbook each time you hand it in. I will not read anything in the left-hand pouch, and if I have to sort through scratch paper, class notes, etc. in the right-hand pouch, I become borderline psychotic and assign grades accordingly.

**ONE-ACT PLAY OR SCREENPLAY:** Eventually this will be a playable script or filmable screenplay of 30-50 pages, designed to last approximately one half hour. Installments will be due in Weeks 8 and optionally Week 10, a completed draft in Week 12, and a final script Thursday of the last week of classes, i.e. April 24. The draft submitted in Week 12 should be as good as you can possibly make it at that point. It will be given a staged reading by the class, followed by a detailed and candid critique that will almost certainly generate ideas for final changes, large or small depending on your own and the class's reaction. Then you will submit a revised final script in the last week of classes. Grading of the final script (as with all your work) will be “holistic”—a single grade, based on the overall aesthetic success of your script, as best I can estimate it. But this does NOT mean I will or can overlook sloppiness in the basic writing.

**MANUSCRIPT FORM.** All assignments must be typewritten. For scripts, adhere generally to the guidelines in Catron, pp. 84-89, but dispense with copyright information, draft number, and dedication page. Use simple consecutive pagination and do NOT bind the script or put it in an annoying plastic cover; a staple in the upper left-hand corner is fine. Please use no fonts smaller than 12 point. For the script that goes into workshop in Weeks 12-15, you must provide copies for every class member, plus two for me. These should be photocopied or printed on one side only, and N.B., it will be helpful if you have a clipboard to use during these weeks, when we are performing each other's scripts.

For the few assignments we have that are NOT scripts, use standard margins and spacing.

**LATE WORK.** Always get in touch with me BEFORE the deadline if you expect to be late with an assignment; the chances are pretty good that I can grant you a short extension. Otherwise late work will be penalized one grade step (e.g., from B+ to B) for each calendar day of lateness, weekends and holidays included. Pick up the phone, dial my number, and save yourself from this demoralizing fate. On the final due date—April 26, for the revised Final Script—those who have taken their turns in workshop last (on April 19, 24, 26) may have extensions till Tuesday of finals week if they wish; all others should expect me to be pitilessly insistent on the deadline.

**MISCELLANEOUS.** There will be no final examination.

I will be more than happy to grant reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Contact me immediately if you will need such an accommodation.

Please make a habit of bringing this syllabus to class, as we will need to adjust it rather frequently during the semester.
SCHEDULE

NOTE: AFTER THE FIRST WEEK, PLEASE COMPLETE ALL READINGS BY THE BEGINNING OF THE WEEK IN WHICH THEY ARE ASSIGNED. EXERCISES SHOULD BE DONE BY TUESDAY OF THE WEEK AFTER THEY ARE ASSIGNED.

1) January 9, 11
   READING: Synge, Riders to The Sea, Cerf p. 231.
   DISCUSSION TOPICS: Course Introduction. The nature of drama. Play times and places. Active vs. passive heroism in Synge’s play.

2) January 16, 18
   READING: Willingham and Henry, The Graduate, in Thomas, p. 296. If you can, rent the video and watch the film. Catron, Chapter 11.
   EXERCISE #1, Strategic Eavesdropping: Arrange to overhear a fairly lengthy conversation between at least two people. Write down the conversation as exactly as you possibly can, including repetitions, pauses, tangents, etc. (You will have to rely in part on your memory, since no one can write as fast as people speak; still, try to be as exact as you can. N.B.: Don’t get caught and punched out.) When you type up your scribbled notes, follow the script guidelines in Catron, Chapter 11. At the end, comment briefly (in a paragraph or so) on whatever possibilities for drama you see in the conversation. If you find no such possibilities, say what it is that makes the conversation so boring.

3) January 23, 25
   DISCUSSION TOPICS: Background and foreground. The role of the past in Crimes. Conflict and resolution. Instructions for Group Project.
   EXERCISE #2, Topics List: Make a brief list, 10-15 items long, of topics that you might imagine writing a play about. Items on the list should usually be one line or less, never more than two. At least half of these items should come directly from your personal experience and be expressed using a first-person pronoun (“I,” “me,” “my,” or “mine”). Most items should refer to an event, conflict, or specific span of time, e.g., “The day I told my mother about my drug problem,” “Adjusting to life after my parents’ divorce.”
   EXERCISE #3, Group Project: Arrange to meet with your assigned group and produce a) A list of your top five TV commercials of all time; B) A script of 1-3 pages for a commercial endorsing the product or brand of your choice. C) Rough plans for presenting the commercial to the class.

4) January 30, February 1
   READING: Sister Mary Ignatius Explains it All for You, in McNamara, p. 191. Catron, Chapters 17-18.
EXERCISE #4, Character Study: In a prose study of 500-1000 words, describe a character who will be—or at least could be—the central figure in the play you are preparing to write. Address the following points among others:

- Physical traits: What is most striking and most characteristic in the character's physical being and appearance? Include significant details about clothing and mannerisms.

- Character concept or ruling passion. What is your central idea for this character, and what makes him or her tick? Note that these two rather different questions should have the same answer, or you're probably off track. Note also that people often fail to recognize—or wish to deny—their own most central characteristics.

- In what particular ways does this central motif of the character reveal itself in his or her life? (For the moment, imagine that life as separate from any particular dramatic rendering thereof.)

- Nuances: what aspects of the character notably contradict or defy the central motif? What extra dimensions make your character "round" rather than "flat"?

- Central conflict. What is the most important conflict in the character's life? To what extent is this a conflict of circumstance, to what extent an inner conflict, and how do the two areas of conflict reflect one another?

DISCUSSION TOPICS: Commercials presented in class on Thursday. Sharing from topics lists.

WORKBOOKS DUE ON THURSDAY

(Character Studies not required yet; but include your own copy of the script written by your group.)

5) February 6, 8

READING: Catron, Chapters 8, 14, 15. Rabe, Streamers, in McNamara, 13.

EXERCISE #5, SCENARIO: Create the scenario for your one-act play or screenplay, about 750-1000 words long. Be sure to touch on the following:

- A list of all characters in the play, described and discussed in order of their importance to the main conflict.

- A statement of the main conflict of the play. What will be at issue in the play and how will the conflict be resolved? How will this conflict illustrate and grow out of the characters’—especially the main character’s—past life, past choices, and intrinsic nature? What will the resolution change for the main character?

- A fairly detailed description of the play's setting—or of the screenplay’s locations and scenes.

- A detailed, scene-by-scene summary of the play's action, listing each dramatic encounter and what it establishes.

DISCUSSION TOPICS: Motivation and action in Streamers and other works.
6) February 13, 15

READING: Character studies and scenarios from the class.
CLASS DISCUSSION: Comparison, discussion, and brainstorming of character studies and scenarios.

WORKBOOKS DUE ON THURSDAY

7) February 20, 22

READING: Thompson, On Golden Pond, in Thomas, 425. Try to rent the video and watch the film.
DISCUSSION TOPICS: Close analysis of the script and the film.

8) February 27, March 1

FIRST EXCERPT DUE ON THURSDAY. BE SURE TO KEEP YOUR OWN COPY
READING: Guare, Marco Polo Sings a Solo, in McNamara, 85.
DISCUSSION TOPICS: Farce and Theater of the Absurd. Spectacle; problems of staging.

9) March 6, 8

READING: Catron, Chapter 20.

SPRING RECESS, MARCH 12-16

10) March 20, 22

SECOND EXCERPT DUE ON TUESDAY (OPTIONAL) BE SURE TO KEEP YOUR OWN COPY
CLASS DISCUSSION: Introducing complications and building to the climax.
READING EXAM ON THURSDAY

11) March 27, 29

CLASS DISCUSSION: Problem solving; sharing of excerpts from drafts and workbooks

EXERCISE #7, Movie Review: Write a 500-750 word review of a movie or play you have seen recently, perhaps over the break. Ideally, you should see the movie twice, or read the play as well as seeing it. Remember that a review usually accomplishes most of the following (though not necessarily in this order):

- Gives a brisk, vivid, immediately clear summary of the work's plot or story or central conflict.
- Lists and briefly describes the main characters and those who play them, usually in order of importance.
- "Locates" the work in some larger context—e.g., films of the same type, the lead actor or director's previous body of work.
- Gives some brief statement, general but reasonably incisive, of the work's theme or message.
• Appraises the performances of director, main actors, and other contributors.
• Judges the overall success or failure of the work, in a tone that is personal but also reasonable and measured and objective.

COMPLETED SCRIPT DUE ON THURSDAY (SELECTED VOLUNTEERS) OR FOLLOWING TUESDAY (EVERYONE ELSE). PROVIDE MULTIPLE COPIES.

12) April 3, 5
   WORKSHOP AND PERFORMANCE

13) April 10, 12
   WORKSHOP AND PERFORMANCE
   WORKBOOK DUE ON THURSDAY

14) April 17, 29
   WORKSHOP AND PERFORMANCE

15) April 24, 26
   WORKSHOP AND PERFORMANCE
   FINAL SCRIPT DUE ON THURSDAY