

Playwriting
Course Syllabus
Instructor: Timothy Nolan

Course Description

Each course session will be divided between exploring a different topic (plot, character, structure, etc.) and a reading of student work. Students will be expected to bring short scenes to class for reading and review by fellow class members.

Required Reading

Aristotle *Poetics* (Francis Fergusson Introduction) Hill and Wang 1961
Brook, Peter *The Empty Space* Scribner 1968, 1995

Recommended Reading

Egri, Lajos *The Art of Dramatic Writing* Touchstone 1942
Goldman, William *Adventures in the Screen Trade* Warner 1983
Lumet, Sidney *Making Movies* Vintage 1985
Strasberg, Lee *A Dream of Passion*
Truby, John *The Anatomy of a Story* Farrar, Strauss, Giroux 2007

Approach and Foundation

The general approach will follow the dramatic principles outlined in Peter Brook's *The Empty Space* and as taught at the Actors Studio, especially specificity of action and intent. This approach can be translated into both realistic and abstract forms. Through observation and experience this specificity of action approach creates sharp and direct action while still allowing the theatrical art to grow onstage.

Course Goals

Students will learn the basics of dramatic structure, plot, character, setting, conflict, and the unity of opposites. Students will learn these through a combination of lecture, discussion, and (most importantly) reading and critiquing of their own scenes.

Classes

Week 1: Introduction to dramatic writing. What makes dramatic writing different from other types of creative writing? How plot and character work together to create drama.

Week 2: Plot. Discussion of plot structure. Types of conflict: internal vs. external. What makes a story dramatic? First five-page scene assignment: write a two-character scene where one character has to face and make a decision.

Week 3: Setting: How to use setting to heighten conflict. Assignment: Take Week 2 scene and rewrite it in a setting that heightens the drama.

Week 4: Character. What makes a good character? Discussion of character traits. Setup and payoff. Assignment: Write a character bio mentioning traits that will lead the character down the path of the story/conflict.

Week 5: Specificity of Action: What do characters want? Why do they want it? What is their experience? How do writers translate experience into action? Assignment: Write a short two-character scene that clearly shows their wants and how they conflict with each other.

Week 6: What do actors look for in characters? What makes characters playable? How does specificity build audience empathy with your characters? Assignment: In-class readings of scenes with actors followed by discussion with actors.

Week 7: Conflict/Protagonist vs. Antagonist: Do “bad guys” exist? How each character is serving a need, how opposing needs create conflict. Assignment: Write a short scene showing a character doing a “bad” thing for the “right” reason.

Week 8: Plot & Character/Unity of Opposites: How a character facing a decision is the seed of all drama. How character and plot fuel each other. Difference between drama and melodrama. Assignment: Five-page, two-character scene where one character works themselves into a corner and can't get out.

Week 9: Realization/Complications/Obstacles: How to get from realization to climax. What happens to a character once they have decided on a course of action and come to a realization about it? Assignment: Five-page continuation from Week 6 assignment: scene showing the decision and the obstacles encountered.

Week 10: Critique and conclusion: Discussion of processing criticism. In-class presentation of ten-page scenes, with comment and critique.

Final Project: Public presentation of student scenes (format to be determined).