Grade 12 Playwriting, College/University - ADP4M

Focus Course Profile
This course requires students to experiment individually and collaboratively with forms and conventions of both drama and theatre from various cultures and time periods. Students will interpret dramatic literature and other text and media sources while learning about various theories of directing and acting. Students will examine the significance of dramatic arts in various cultures, and will analyse how the knowledge and skills developed in drama are related to their personal skills, social awareness, and goals beyond secondary school.

This course focuses on the art of playwriting and development of the skills necessary to vision, write, and tell a story using theatre as a medium.

Course Overview
Students in this course focus on the role of the playwright in the theatre process. They will learn about scene and play structures through writing, reading, viewing and performing various historical and contemporary texts from around the world. They will apply their understanding of different stages of the play writing process in active ways that develop their dramatic skills. As playwrights themselves, they will examine the particular needs of the stage as compared to those of the cinema.

Scope & Sequence

Unit Descriptions

Unit 1 - Team Building & Storytelling
This unit involves using storytelling as a springboard for playwriting ideas. Students in large and small groups will experiment with adding words and phrases to each other's stories, with an emphasis on the development of two central characters and an obvious external conflict. The unit will begin with oral participation, and gradually move to the written word. Teachers might use the Talking Stick, or a similar device, to encourage good listening skills to help focus attention on the main speaker. The teacher should take the time to explain storytelling traditions from around the globe. Alternatively, groups of students could present the storytelling traditions of diverse cultures. Since the Culminating Activity is centred around Myth, this exploration of storytelling among various peoples is an excellent starting point. Discussion of student work will focus on the importance of carefully selecting events for retelling to an audience (i.e., the earliest form of editing) and the introduction of internal conflict and subtext. Students will investigate key playwriting elements and will create a Playwriting Portfolio, which will be assessed and used throughout the course to collect resources, pre-writing exercises, etc.

Unit 2 - Reading Scripts - Independent Study
This unit involves reading plays. Students will acquire through the teacher, the school library, the Internet or an outside library, a number of one-act plays. They will then choose 2 of these plays to read and analyze over the course of the semester. Although they are expected to choose 2 plays for study, this does not preclude the students from reading more. Students will prepare either an oral presentation, or a comparison/contrast essay that shows insight into the similarities and differences in play structure and form between the two works. In addition to this Independent Study, the teacher will also use class time to look at script excerpts and discuss variations in dialogue structure, set and stage direction details, realistic vs. stylistic drama, and the careful and precise use of exposition in a script.

Unit 3 - Finding Sources & Writing
This unit explores where playwrights get their ideas. Students are provided with opportunities to experiment with various sources using different forms of drama (tableau, improvisation, the Living Newspaper, narrated mime, object monologues, etc.). Students will create short scripts (approximately 5 minutes of continual dialogue) and direct others in a workshop format. Observation of the playwriting process will centre around the importance of suspense and irony to engage the audience's interest and the addition of issues to heighten conflict. The teacher and the student's peers will assess the plot elements and the believability of the characters in the written text. The study of character will involve recognizing how a character's beliefs govern his/her actions, and how characters behave according to these beliefs, which are not necessarily the beliefs of, nor directly associated with, the value system of the playwright. Each playwriting assignment will build upon pre-existing script elements, so that each student will have at least five fully completed scenes for revising in Unit 4.

Unit 4 - The Revision Process
This unit, which centres around editing and rewriting scripts, should be structured similar to a unit in a Language Arts classroom in the way it employs the writing process. The goal of this unit should be for each student to produce a revised written script, at least 20 minutes in length, for evaluation. The teacher, as facilitator, will confer with students and provide guidance for editing and revising their work. Particular emphasis should be given to instructing students on the problem of relying too much on the visual presentation so that their play becomes a cinematic work (a screenplay) rather than a stage script. The question of what can and cannot be done on stage should be addressed only after some writing has been done. Every effort should be made to remind the students of the artistry that arises from a script when staging problems are solved in a theatrical
manner where "less means more." The teacher should take the time to discuss the differences between Realistic stage sets and Iconic ones and help the individual student to decide in which realm their particular work lies. Peer assessment and teacher assessment of written text should also focus on the danger of moralizing and unearned wish fulfillment (see list of glossary terms). The teacher should also take the time to examine the idea of subtext and explore how to eliminate directly stated subtext from a character's lines (see lesson below).

**Unit 5 - Formulas and Frameworks**

The first part of this unit requires students to read stories from myth (e.g., First Nations, Greek, or African myth). Small-group and large-group discussion will focus on the similarities between myth and modern literature, plays, and films (e.g., the Cohen Brothers' movie, *O Brother Where Art Thou* as an envisioning of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by Homer). As a prelude to the culminating activity, students will form small groups (of 3 or 4) and decide on a particular myth to modernize. They will then, individually, invent a character (in a modern context) who exhibits mythical qualities (e.g., the President of the Student Council as Keewaydin, Chief of the Northwest Wind, or the shy new girl in town as Kokomis of Ojibway legend). The students will then write a character sketch or character biography to show their full understanding of how to unite the modern and the mythological characteristics and create believable "mirrors" to the original mythological characters.

**Culminating Activity**

The Culminating Activity involves small-group work (3-4 students) in which students will take their chosen myth and then write a play (approximately 30 minutes in length), featuring elements of the myth in a modern context. An example that exists on stage is Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, which borrows heavily from the *Oedipus* plays of Sophocles, and includes the topics of blindness and the danger of secrets. By this point, the students should have become familiar with the structure of a play, and also the formulaic elements that crop up again in plays from different periods. Writing based on a pre-existing framework requires higher order thinking, especially in not only modernizing the text, but also the symbolic elements of the original myth. One of the examples below combines the myth structure with an environmental theme. Although this is not required, there is obvious merit and maturity in uniting a social justice message with a modern myth.

The following story synopsis examples, which use Greek Myth as a basis, are merely intended to show how the work can be done, but are not a prescription for the work itself:

**Example 1 - Thirsting for Life (a re-telling of Prometheus)**

A young man, Peter, following his mother's divorce, visits his mother in Brazil. His mother is the CEO of a bottled water company in Cochabamba in South America (This is the site of an actual protest over the privatization of water by the Bechtel Corporation in conjunction with the World Bank). The young man, who spends time with the people of Cochabamba, sees a problem with his mother's power over the people and her control of the water supply. Like a modern day Prometheus, he decides to blow up the dam that harnesses the area's water. His friend, Emily, a female version of Epimetheus, warns him that his actions may get him in trouble, but he will not listen. His mother, similar to Henry II calling upon the death of Thomas Becket, asks that her son be stopped and punished for his rebellious ideas. In the fight that ensues between her bodyguards and her son, Peter is hanged from the dam. The people of Cochabamba bear witness to what happens to those who stand against the establishment.

Resources that were used in the creation of this piece were the book *Blue Gold* by Maude Barlow, the television documentary *The Corporation, The Thirsting For Life* missions program, and assorted material from the United Nations.

**Example 2 - Twelve (a re-telling of The Labours of Hercules)**

A man, John, who is a recent addition to a psychiatric facility, has visions of being visited by the Goddess Hera. The Goddess, in his vision, instructs him to complete tasks for her. For example, one of the tasks is to steal the belt of Hippolyte, which the man, mistakenly, assumes is the security belt and warning device worn by one of the nurses at the hospital. John is also required to fight the Cretan Bull, a rough, unmanners patient in one of his counselling sessions. His final task is to kill the Nemean Lion. The man believes the Nemean Lion to be the Chief Psychiatrist, because he is, metaphorically speaking, "The King of the Jungle." In the climactic final scene, John attacks and kills the Chief Psychiatrist in his office and then sits proudly at the Chief Psychiatrist's desk, wearing his coat and his glasses, the new king of the jungle.

**Resources**

**WEBSITE RESOURCES**

http://artswork.asu.edu/arts
http://www.edta.org
http://www.vcu.edu/arts/playwriting

**BOOK RESOURCES**


Gilmour, Barry. *Is It Done Yet?* ISBN 0325010960 Teaching adolescents the art of revision.


**FILM/VIDEO RESOURCES**

*Work in Progress: The Nuts and Bolts of Writing Plays* - 2003 Films For The Humanities and Sciences, Princeton, NJ

**Instructional Strategies**

**Writing Solo Plays & Monologues** - Various small writing exercises will teach the students how to better reveal character and conflict, through understanding emotion and being able to gauge honest reactions to the given circumstances.

**Tableau Series (Backwards from a Consequence)** - Students, working in small groups, will create tableau images that reveal understanding of the key elements of a scene. Adding improvised narration or using a tapping in/tapping out strategy can also help to build dialogue for further scene exploration and creation.

**Small Group Conferencing** - Students hold meetings to discuss problems and possible solutions, highlight action items, and assign responsibilities and deadlines to group members.

**Improvisation** - Students use improvisation and role play to better understand the natural rhythm of a scene and create dialogue that is believable and relevant to the characters involved in the given circumstances.

**Small Group Interview** - The teacher will confer with the students about particular script concerns, both in the writing, and in the playing of scenes. Particular focus should be given to highlighting the dangers of written subtext and the inclusion of too much exposition.

**Use of Exemplars from Stage Productions and Film Productions** - The teacher can show, provided he/she has the required permissions, scenes from plays to highlight dialogue structures, themes, and character emotions. Alternatively, film versions of plays or movie scenes can be shown to demonstrate the same concepts. Students can be given specific observation ‘look-fors’ during viewing and have follow up discussions or write their responses.

**Independent Study** - Students, throughout the course, will acquire and read various scenes and one-act plays in order to better understand the elements of plot, character, setting, and theme. Refer to BLM #1 Play Reading Independent Study Analysis for an example of this assignment.

**Scene Presentation and Critiquing** - The students will present their work before an audience of their peers. The teacher and the viewing audience will assess the pros and cons of the given performance and provide meaningful and constructive feedback to the playwrights.

**Use of Google Docs for Team Playwriting** - This writing and networking tool will prove invaluable to students as they engage in the writing process. From pre-writing to the final script, the individuals in a student team will be able to see each other’s changes in real time and provide instant feedback to their group members.

**Writer’s Workshop** - The teacher should consider using the Language Arts model for the Writing Process. The AARRRP concept of Adding, Removing, Revising, Re-writing, and Proofreading work is an excellent structure to follow when conferencing with individual students and student writing teams.

**Glossary of Terms Specific to Course**

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Aristotle’s Six Elements of Drama - These include Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Music, and Spectacle.

Credo - A personal statement of convictions. A credo is the writer’s beliefs concerning topics he/she feels are highly important. Refer to BLM #2 Credo Example.

Exposition - Material in a play which mainly provides the audience with background information on the various characters and situations. This exposition could be spoken by characters in the scene and/or a narrator, or could be shown to the audience through some form of visual aid (projection, cue cards, etc.).

External Conflict - A term meaning the exterior obstacles (objects or characters) that stand in the way of a character achieving his/her desire. For example, Bob wishes to return a toaster and the manager at the local hardware store will not budge on the return since Bob has lost the original receipt.

Iconic Stage Design - The use of simple set pieces (boxes, towers, and risers, for example) to represent much larger objects and the surrounding environment. For example, a pole with a life preserver placed on it could represent an entire dock and a bucket and pail could represent an entire beach.

Internal Conflict - A term meaning the personal conflict that exists within the psyche of the character. Usually these conflicts are created due to some unfulfilled need or desire, or the character’s conscience. For example, Hamlet’s task to carry out the request of his dead father is sometimes said to be in conflict with his moral stance on murder (conscience).

Living Newspaper - A term for a theatrical form presenting factual information on current events to a popular audience. Historically, Living Newspapers have also urged social action and reacted against naturalistic and realistic theatrical conventions in favour of more direct, experimental techniques, including the extensive use of multimedia.

Moralizing - This is a phrase which suggests the playwright has implanted into his/her characters too much of his/her own belief system. The characters do not take shape and develop as they should based on the given circumstances, for the playwright has written them to contain his/her moral judgements on what happens in the play. Often, one character will deliver a monologue or longer speech that preaches to the audience about the best way to solve the problem presented by the play.

Playwright’s Portfolio - A collection of material organized by the playwright. Usually in some form of bound volume (binder, journal, etc.) the play writing portfolio contains work in progress, scenarios and notes for new scripts, character sketches, possible dramatic situations, news clippings, examples of dialogue, thematic ideas, and the writer’s credo.

Realistic Drama - A form of theatre that attempts to create the illusion of reality on stage. Realistic drama contains scenes reflecting the actual lived experiences and behavioural choices that make sense and seem believable to the viewing audience. The stage design of a ‘realistic’ play tries to replicate the real world of the audience. For example, a ‘realistic’ play would have not only living-room furniture on stage, but also the drawers of the coffee table might contain 3 or 4 books of matches, an emergency candle, a bag of batteries, a cribbage game, cards, dice, etc. with which the characters may or may not interact.

Scenario - An outline of the play. A scenario contains all the major action of plot and character movement. It is a narrative description of the play as a whole, action by action, including character motivation and responses to situation.

Stylistic Drama - A form of theatre that offers exaggerated characters and situations and does not try to replicate an actual "lived" reality for the audience. The choices of the characters and the obstacles they face, although derived from real situations to begin with, are presented in a heightened manner. Stylistic theatre is concerned more with the effect on the audience rather than authenticity in character behaviour. Consider, for example, a character who, when shot on stage, has segments of his or her costume pre-set to tear away and reveal red streamers representing blood. Other characters, acting as the Fates, might grab the streamers and twist them into a web as the character dies, thus presenting a very stylized representation of an element of the drama.

Subtext - Content beneath the written lines of the playwright and the spoken lines of the actor.

Tapping In/Tapping Out - This is an instructional strategy used by the teacher while the students are engaged in tableaux. The teacher moves through the playing area, tapping individual students at different times. When students are tapped, they must say the first line that comes into their head based on they are in and the way they believe the character feels the situation at that particular moment. Also called thought tracking.

Unearned Wish Fulfillment - This is a phrase which suggests the playwright’s ending is not satisfactory to the
audience, because the situations that have been presented in the play demand more from the characters. In most cases, the obstacles placed in the characters' paths are removed too readily and the audience is left feeling that the play did not offer a suitable, nor a truly believable, solution to the problems it presented.

**Unity of Opposites** - (from Lagos Egri) - Writing character in such a way that their fundamental beliefs and values will not find compromise.

### Examples of Activities

#### Unit 1 - Silent Solo Plays
Students write a solo play, casting themselves as the central character. The simple script involves details of setting and time and basic stage direction. The play involves an entrance and an exit for the character involved. The scene deals with a character's difficulty working with a particular object (for example, a faulty blender or a problem game system). There is no dialogue. The focus is entirely on actions and the obstacles placed in a character's path. Discussion, after viewing, should involve the importance of escalating the action and heightening the stakes, with analysis of Repetition and Progression as tools of the playwright. Further experimentation could involve adding an internal conflict.

#### Unit 1 - The Object Monologue
Students write a monologue, with an object as the central character. The writing exercise involves personifying the object and using outside-the-box metaphorical thinking to apply imagery to the writing. The presentation aspect of the exercise is similar to a *Voices In The Head* activity. The object is placed at centre stage, and the student stands offstage delivering the object's lines or speaks into a microphone, while hidden from view, the thoughts of the object. A model for this exercise might be a Coffee Cup, for example, that is keenly aware of how dependent a teacher is on having a drink of coffee every morning before starting school. The monologue might focus on how the cup sees itself as important in holding the elixir of life that provides its owner with his/her needed caffeine fix, and is integral in insuring a meaningful educational experience for the youngsters who attend its owner's class.

#### Unit 3 - Plan Y From Scene X
Using Newspaper Headlines, YouTube Videos, or RSS feeds, students will use tableau and improvisation as a means of showing their understanding of the 5W's. A method for understanding the cause/effect relationship in any story is to have the students work backwards from the consequence. Discussion, after viewing the tableaux and improvised scenes, should centre around the idea that consistency of character and action in a scripted text comes from Scene Y being the result of the events and character choices in Scene X. If this does not happen, there are problems in the script.

#### Unit 3 - Every Picture Tells A Story
4 Photographs or Artworks are shown to the students. It is not necessary for the images to relate to each other, but having the students focus on a particular theme or plot-line does help to speed up the writing process. When the first picture is shown, individuals write the story they imagine in 4 sentences or less. When the second picture is shown, students partner up, with each person writing 2 sentences of the story, not exceeding 4 sentences. The sentences do not have to be written consecutively. When the third picture is shown, students, again individually, write 10 lines of dialogue (5 per character) associated with the imagined story of the scene. When the fourth picture is shown, students, again partnered, write one line of dialogue and then pass their paper to the next student who writes the following line and so on, until at least 10 lines of dialogue have been completed. Alternatively, this work could be done in a computer lab. It is also possible to apply timelines to each section of the exercise (for example, 5-7 minutes for shared dialogue, rather than a specific number of lines).

#### Unit 4 - Overheard Conversations
Students are asked to listen to conversations in the school hallway, the cafeteria, restaurants, malls, etc. In addition to writing down the conversations they hear, they are asked to analyze the structure of the dialogue (truncated sentences, interjections, space filler, the use of colloquialisms, etc.). The purpose of the exercise is to get a better sense of how people actually talk, so that the dialogue they write is believable and connected to an obvious reality. In this way, they can begin to assess the pros and cons of writing either in line with, or in contrast to, contemporary speech patterns and understand their own reasoning for their choice.

### Assessment and Evaluation Strategies

- Short answer questions based on assigned readings
- Playwriting terminology quizzes
- Writing the Credo - Assess a list of 10 "I Believe" statements, prior to writing scenes
- Writing short 5 minute scenes for assessment purposes - Checkpoints for longer writing pieces
- Observational assessment of improvised scenes based on short 5 minute sections of text
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<th>Assessment Component</th>
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<tr>
<td>Playwriting Rubric (see BLM#3 Evaluation Rubric)</td>
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<td>Playwright's Journal/Portfolio - Assessment &amp; Evaluation</td>
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<td>Character Sketch or BLM#4 Character Bio Inventory</td>
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<td>Peer Assessment (see BLM#5 Peer Assessment Guide)</td>
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<td>Rehearsal Assessment Checklist</td>
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### Critical Learning

Students will recognize spoken subtext in a script and how it impedes audience engagement by removing suspense and irony. Students will learn the value of actions and how actions, rather than text or dialogue, can reveal character. They will revise written scenes to create dialogue that supposes trust from the audience and provides actors with an opportunity to use action, rather than words, to reveal character and intent.

### Guiding Questions

- What is subtext?
- What does the saying ‘actions speak louder than words’ mean?
- How can nonverbal communication reveal intent?
- How does an individual’s reactions to events reveal ‘character’?

### Curriculum Expectations

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<th>Learning Goals</th>
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<td>At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:</td>
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<td>• Recognize subtext in both the written and spoken word and be able to edit a draft script by removing the overt subtext from a character’s lines</td>
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<td>• Critically examine a peer’s scene performance for problems in underwriting character or over-writing exposition</td>
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### Instructional Components

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<th>Readiness</th>
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<td>Students should have prior knowledge of subtext and its effect on a dramatic scene. They would have looked at the section on subtext from The Playwriting Seminars by Richard Toscan, Virginia Commonwealth University (see Hyperlink Subtext). Students need to understand proper script format and be familiar with stage directions.</td>
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The students, in groups of three, have already written a 15 minute three person scene on either the theme of death or love. These topics are vague enough to allow exploration, but also defined enough to prevent students from never arriving at an idea.

Each student group has been assigned a corresponding peer evaluation group to assess and provide feedback on both the written script and the workshop performance. Each student group, before performing, must provide the peer evaluation group and the teacher with the working script. The peer evaluation groups should have read the script and completed BLM #5 prior to this lesson.

A suitable playing area, if a stage is not available, will need to be set up to workshop the student pieces.

### Terminology

Subtext

### Materials

- Photocopies of student scripts (An environmental alternative is to create an electronic version and project it for the viewing audience to see during the performance).
- An exemplar script that shows proper form and style - either in the form of a photocopy or available to view on a website (perhaps the teacher’s own website).
- Access to a computer lab
- A playing area or stage space to present the workshop scripts
- Audio Visual Aid in the form of an overhead projector, a SMART board, or digital projector
- Photocopies of BLM #5 Peer Assessment (the environmental option would be to produce a version of this electronically for viewing)
# Unit 4 - The Revision Process

## Lesson: To Say or Not To Say

### Minds On

**Approximately 20 minutes**

**Whole class > Discussion**

By way of reviewing subtext, use the Iceberg Analogy. Use a SMART board or some other visual aid to illustrate how the 1/3 of the iceberg above the water represents the spoken text and the actions of the characters involved, while the 2/3 below the waterline represents a character's hidden desires and their unspoken thoughts. In this lesson, focus on what doesn't need to be said and what can be eliminated from the written text.

### Action!

**Approximately 100 minutes**

**Small groups > Presentation**

Have each student group provide a brief presentation outlining:

- The context of their scene
- A description of the setting and the characters
- An explanation of how the scene fits into the overall lives of the characters
- Their key intention for the scene so that the audience is aware of subtextual desire.

Following this, instruct the peer evaluation group to offer feedback based on the written script they have previously read. The audience can then compare their comments to those of the peer evaluation group. Peer groups should watch to see if their assessment notes change because of the performance. **Does the performance provide clarity that wasn't there before?**

**Small groups > Performance**

Have each student group perform their scenes.

**Whole class > Discussion**

Following each performance, briefly discuss what was explicitly revealed in the scene, focusing on what the characters said to betray their true intention or emotions. Invite the audience to provide feedback, in particular, the peer evaluation group. Discuss how the writers could explore character development and subtext more effectively while encouraging student writers to take notes directly on their scripts.

**Prompts for audience:**

- What lines of dialogue or situations really hit home in terms of emotional content? What did the characters want (intent) and how did they try to get it (strategy)? Were the intentions shown or told? How can the writers eliminate exposition? How can the characters use actions rather than text to demonstrate intent?

### Consolidation

**Approximately 20 minutes**

The student groups will return to their original script and discuss possible changes based on the feedback they have received from their classmates and the teacher.

**Prompts for writers:**

- What feedback is useful to you in revising your scene?
- Were you aware, when performing your scene, of any spoken text that can be eliminated without damaging the story (consider both Subtext and Exposition)?
- Are there any parts of your scene that you should eliminate or revise but are too proud of to let them go? (Remember as Stephen King said, "Sometimes you have to kill your darlings.")

Student groups will use the Writer's Workshop ARRRP strategy (discussed in Instructional Strategies above) to make changes to their original script. At this point, Google Docs would be an excellent tool for collaboration on the final script.

Following conferencing with the teacher and a re-write, the revised script will be handed in for evaluation.

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