



# An Analysis of Undergraduate Playwriting Syllabi

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Playwriting asserts a small but lively presence at colleges and universities in theatre and English programs. According to *Peterson's* online college guide, twenty-seven schools in the United States and Canada offer degrees in playwriting and screenwriting. There is also an increasing body of literature on what should be taught in the playwriting classroom, from such books as *Playwrights Teach Playwriting*, edited by Joan Herrington and Crystal Brian, to essays on playwriting pedagogy like Paul Gardiner's "Playwriting Pedagogy and the Myth of Intrinsic Creativity" (in *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*), Anne García-Romero and Alice Tuan's "**Teaching Playwriting in the 21st Century**," and Jonathan Levy's "**Why Teach Playwriting?**" Yet despite this growth in interest in playwriting pedagogy, there is little information available on what is actually being taught in contemporary college classrooms, and if that instruction indeed follows practices recommended by the literature. The following results, collected from a survey of playwriting syllabi from schools across the country, fills this information gap by revealing the kind of instruction that generally takes place in the introductory playwriting classroom. This analysis furthermore provides insight about academe's positioning of playwriting within its curriculum, as well as how burgeoning playwrights are introduced to the practice. The results of this survey respond to the following questions, while comparing them to the pedagogic practices as suggested by the literature review: (1) what are the stated, primary goals in courses that focus on an introduction to playwriting? (2) What kinds of assignments do these courses employ? (3) What kinds of texts do they use? And finally, (4) how are issues of gender and diversity (domestic, racial, and cultural, as well as international and historical) handled in these courses?

A brief literature review of contemporary playwriting pedagogy provides a useful rubric of suggested best practices in the classroom. Paul Gardiner's 2016 Australian study, "Playwriting Pedagogy and the Myth of Intrinsic Creativity" collected data from high school playwriting students and teachers through journals and interviews and found that while many educators considered playwriting ability

to be an innate talent, “the teachers’ belief in the intrinsic nature of creativity...meant that they also neglected strategies...that may have addressed this skill deficit” (257). Gardiner recommends a “playwriting pedagogical approach that takes account of the spectrum of theoretical approaches” (260) from “closed” instruction to “open” methods of instruction. According to Gardiner, the “closed” approach is “influenced by Aristotle’s *Poetics*... [and] focuses on the resolution of a plot, centered on a single protagonist, struggling against both their fatal flaw and an...antagonist, [and]...normally includes...resolved dilemmas and consistent characters.” Conversely, the “open” approach “is informed by... twentieth century avant-garde theatre,” “choose[s] not to resolve thematic ideas or demands of plot,” and may “deny the existence of an ‘ultimate’ meaning grounded in resolution” (260).

García-Romero and Tuan’s recent recommendations for higher-education playwriting pedagogy in *HowlRound* suggests that classes should prepare students for the coming challenges facing a professional playwright by (1) empowering students’ voices, (2) bolstering intra-personal human connections in an increasingly “technologically mediated world,” and (3) encouraging students’ ability to foster and use seemingly contradictory skills (marketplace vs. “art,” solitary creation vs. collaborative expansion, etc.). Conversely, Jonathan Levy’s “Why Teach Playwriting?” rejects the idea that playwriting pedagogy should focus on training students for a future of professional playwriting. Levy instead suggests that playwriting classes should utilize the craft as an opportunity to offer students important humanistic life skills, teaching them to (1) recognize and value vivid instances and moments, (2) closely observe human behavior, (3) see through cliché “to nature,” (4) be self-critical, (5) understand and empathize with the other, and (6) be imaginative while working within the constraints of a given project.

This survey helps inform the growing discourse on playwriting pedagogy by grounding it in what is currently taught and applying the recommendations of the literature to current practices. It compiles data from thirty syllabi from institutions on PhD-granting research, masters, BA, BA/AA, and other two-year levels. Samples were collected primarily from Boolean Google searches for playwriting syllabi, and secondarily from emails to individual playwriting instructors. Every attempt was made to establish a pool representative of the general population of US higher-education students by institution. However, attempts to acquire syllabi from two-year schools proved difficult, while playwriting syllabi from four-year and research institutions were relatively easy to locate, suggesting that playwriting tends to be less frequently taught at two-year colleges. The results from this search therefore tend to skew upwards to research/masters institutions in comparison to the national average of all students (Figure 1).

School Type	Percentage of National Student Body	Rep. of Total Sample Syllabi needed (out of 30)	# of Syllabi included in survey (out of 30)
Research (Doctoral and High)	7%	2	5
Masters Col. And Un.	16%	5	5
All BA Colleges	33%	10	9
BA/AA/Other	9%	3	2
All Two-Year	35%	10	9

Percentages of national student body in higher education by institution, corresponding numbers of syllabi needed to represent national student body, and actual number of syllabi included from each institutional type (Carnegie Classification).

Roughly two-thirds of the syllabi in the sample were from classes listed in theatre departments, and roughly one-third were from departments of English. Only four syllabi in the entire sample were from departments outside of theatre or English, suggesting that playwriting is primarily taught in theatre departments, and secondarily in English programs. Most syllabi list “objectives” or “goals” for the primary outcomes of the course, while a few have only a course description. Others differentiate between course and student outcomes. In these cases, the section of the syllabus that most clearly laid out goals for the class was evaluated. Whenever information on a given variable was unavailable or unclear, it was not collected or allocated and did not weigh into results. Given these discrepancies, this survey should not be seen as a scientific or absolute collection of data. However, it does represent a large collection of recent playwriting syllabi from a wide variety of institutions and can provide a window on to contemporary trends.

The thirty syllabi in this sample ranged in length from two to sixteen pages, with the average being 6.7 pages. The average course capacity is 17.5 students. Figure 2 is a word cloud of the most common words and phrases in the course objectives that points to some of the typical topics of interest listed in playwriting classrooms. “Writing,” “students,” “dramatic,” and “plays” are the most frequently listed terms, while other popular words include “structure,” “process,” and “feedback.” The terms demonstrate the primary dialectical tensions in the course objectives between pedagogical approaches in the areas of reading and writing, and between so-called “open” and closed” aesthetic sensibilities.



Word cloud of commonly listed terms from objectives section of thirty playwriting class syllabi.

One of the primary tensions shown in the syllabi is the one between reading and writing plays. All classes in the sample require writing of some sort, though not all the classes require that students write a play script of any length. Seventy-six percent of the classes have a writing workshop component. Forty percent of syllabi describe fostering a students' ability to give and receive feedback on their writing as a primary course objective. Forty percent require that students revise scripts in some way after receiving feedback. Twenty percent of course objectives state that students will write exercises in response to specific readings of plays or secondary texts. One course at an Eastern BA-granting institution concentrates almost exclusively on writing plays, creating a 90-100-page writing portfolio consisting of monologues, a ten-minute play, a one-act, and a research journal. The primary reading component of this class is to review *The New York Times* for play research. There are no plays read, but students must produce staged readings.

While the overall emphasis of the courses in this sample is on writing, there is a surprising emphasis on analysis and understanding playwriting through reading, watching, and responding to established (or as one syllabus put it, "successful") plays. Sixty-five percent of classes require that

students read published plays, while 62 percent require that students attend a production of work outside of the classroom. Ninety percent of classes have either readings or productions, or both, suggesting a strong reliance on familiarizing students with established plays. Eighty-six percent of classes require students to read secondary texts on playwriting, creative writing, or dramaturgy. One class that favors familiarizing students with established plays through reading is from a private, Western, BA-granting institution. This course features fourteen primary and secondary readings, including six full-length established plays. The structure of the course revolves around the readings of plays, with discussions, lectures, and writing exercises stemming out of specific lessons demonstrated by the established plays. The primary writing responsibility for students in the class consists of: responses to plays, writing exercises, and a minimum of ten pages of playwriting.

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The stated course objectives also demonstrate tension between instructional practices regarding “open” and “closed” forms of dramatic creation. The objectives in the data suggest that courses tend towards instruction in the “closed” dramatic tradition. Taking into account that all syllabi in the survey were from introductory courses, 70 percent of syllabi list as part of their course objectives that students acquire (as one syllabus had it) “basic elements” of playwriting, a list that generally consists of “closed” components such as plot, conflict, character, and especially “dramatic structure,” which was listed on 53 percent of course objectives in some variation. The language often used to describe structure as “basic,” “traditional,” or “the formula for writing a play” underscores the bias towards a “closed” or more traditional pedagogic approach. Though 30 percent of the syllabi in the survey set a goal to introduce students to a “variety” of “genres” of playwriting, only four syllabi in the survey clearly set out goals to question or problematize traditional forms of dramatic structure. In these four syllabi, the course objectives tend to focus on the development of personal voice, process, and an approach that draws from other art forms such as music, film, and painting. One such syllabi encourages students to discard what they thought was “right,” while another states that there is “no ‘right’ way to wright plays.”

There is a fair amount of consistency to the primary assignments across the courses listings. All but two classes have students write a play of some length or a sample of a play. None of these introductory level courses require a full-length play, but 55 percent of the classes require that students write a one-act play, and 31 percent have students write a ten-minute play as the primary assignment. The courses that require a one-act generally do not have other major writing assignments, while the courses that require ten-minute plays generally require multiple ten-minute plays, revisions, or exercises. Seventeen percent require a portfolio of more than one assignment, which generally includes a short play, drafts, and writing exercises. Two classes require final exams, and one requires a research paper. Thirteen percent of classes require that students perform their work as a staged reading or a workshop production. The activities in the classes include writing workshops, lectures, discussions, writing exercises in response to readings and discussions, and play analysis sessions.

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Every course requires at least one primary or secondary text be read. The most common secondary texts in use are *Playwriting: Brief and Brilliant* by Julie Jensen and *Backwards and Forwards* by David Ball. The four most read playwrights are (respectively) August Wilson, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, and Samuel Beckett. The classes require students to read 3.9 full-length plays on average, with the highest number of required readings being eleven full-length plays, and eight classes require that no full-length plays be read. As you can see in Figure 3, diversity of “established” full-length plays read for class break down as follows: 22 percent of plays read were written by women, 15 percent were written by playwrights from countries other than the United States, 16 percent were written by domestic people of color, and 6 percent of plays read were not written in the twentieth or twenty-first century. The established, full-length plays that are read demonstrate an underrepresentation in plays written by domestic people of color, women, international, and pre-twentieth century playwrights.

% of Plays by Female Playwrights	% by International Playwrights	% by Domestic People of Color	% of Non-20th/21st Century Plays
<b>22%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>6%</b>

Diversity representation of published plays read in thirty playwriting class syllabi.

In conclusion, the results suggest that instructors do not view playwriting as an intrinsic aptitude, as found in Gardiner's study of high school courses, but instead as something that is best taught through the example of established, generally traditional or "closed" plays, as well as writing original plays. Forty percent of classes ask students to develop an awareness of multiple forms or genres of plays, suggesting that there is room for growth in Gardiner's recommendation that a "spectrum of theoretical approaches" (260) be taught in the playwriting classroom. The overall reliance on reading established work further suggests that instructors of introductory courses do not generally heed García-Romero and Tuan's call for the development of one's own authorial voice through writing. This is especially evident given that only 17 percent of syllabi called directly for developing an author's unique voice.

The data shed light on the question of if playwriting classrooms focus on professionalization for future playwrights, as favored by García-Romero and Tuan or encourage humanistic life skills, as laid out by Levy. The most common primary course assignment given is the completion of a one-act play, which, while understandable as a manageable assignment for a semester-long introductory class, is not currently a popular genre of plays. In the most recent call for plays from **Play Submissions Helper**, only 15 percent of calls for submission are for one-act plays, while 35 percent of calls are for 10-minute plays (the remainder being a mix of full-lengths and musicals). The reliance on the one-act play as the primary writing assignment of the playwriting classroom, then, raises the question: are we giving students relevant professional preparation when one-acts have so few production opportunities? Or is it worth continuing teaching the one-act because its length is convenient for the workshop model? Or, in Levy's words, is it "nonsense" to even try to prepare students for lives as professional playwrights, in which case the ten-minute/one-act question is moot and instead becomes: what practices within the discipline best encourage humanistic personal growth?

Finally, the area of feedback is a primary concern in both the pedagogy literature as well as in the syllabi sampled. Indeed, the area of focus in the syllabi that appears to have the most positive correlation with one of Levy's recommendations is in the ability to be self-critical, to "make hard choices," and to let go if what you've created doesn't "work." This is evident in the frequent calls for students to engage in feedback for themselves and others. Nearly half of the syllabi list as a course

objective the creation of an environment where feedback can be constructively given and received. The courses' interest in developing class feedback can also be seen as a way to bridge the solitary nature of playwriting to its collaborative counterpart; a contradiction that is central to one of García-Romero and Tuan's primary criteria for playwriting pedagogy. Of all of García-Romero and Tuan's concerns, it is this contradiction that is the most thoroughly engaged by the syllabi in the survey, primarily through encouraging collective feedback to the individual playwright. This last point, like others in the results of this survey, seem to suggest then that while there is overlap between the contemporary practices in the playwriting classroom and the recommended best practices in the literature, there is still room for improvement.

**Additional Link:**

<https://www.chronicle.com/specialreport/The-Almanac-of-Higher/51>

## Topics

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**Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion****Playwriting****Theatre Education, Pedagogy, & Training****United States**

## Comments 4

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**ROBERT ROBBINS** 2 years ago

Clearly playwriting has become too self-referential. Playwrights know nothing about anything beyond the world of the theater. Not in the sense that the content of plays is constricted to the theater, since most plays avoid being that narcissistic. I mean that playwrights only know what is to be found in plays and the scholarship on the theater and dramatic writing. Fortunately I have broadened my intellectual horizons and found a wealth of