Course Title: Dialogue Writing
Course Code: EGL 54 W
Instructor: Joshua Mohr

Course Summary:

Conventional advice is always advocating that strong dialogue not only furthers characterization but also pushes the story’s plot forward. Okay, sure, that sounds good but how do we really do that?

When you’re home alone watching the cursor flash, cursing the clunky dialogue that mocks you from the page, how can you fix things and have your dialogue accomplish those two towering goals?

The first thing we worry about is what are the characters actually saying. Each word spoken helps the reader form her/his own opinion about the character(s), their preoccupations, biases, passions, etc. Then to compound that issue, it’s just as important to emphasize how the characters are communicating with one another: the way in which the information is being conveyed, its mood and demeanor.

We’ll examine many techniques to solve these problems, as well as examining published works for inspiration. And of course, we’ll write, write, write. You can learn how to construct solid dialogue only by practicing!

*Please see course page for full description and additional details.*

Grade Options and Requirements:

Students have three grading options for this Continuing Studies course:

1. Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass) - Written work is required.
   In this class, letter grades will be determined as follows:

   Participation in Discussion Threads: 40%
   Response to fellow writers’ submissions during Weekly Writing Assignments: 30%
   Longer workshop submission: 30%
2. Credit/No Credit (CR/NC) - Attendance and participation are required. You must receive at least 70% according to the letter grade formula to receive credit.

3. No Grade Requested (NGR) - No work is required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided. (Not suitable for those requiring proof of attendance/completion.)

Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting, by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies department.

Whichever option you choose, the most important things are for you to enjoy yourself, try new things, give back to your fellow writers, and be part of the writing community.

Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.

**Tentative Weekly Outline:**

**Week One: Why do my characters all sound the same?**
Introductions; How do we find nuanced language for each player?
Practice building diction grids.
Read Kate Braverman’s “Tall Tales from the Mekong Delta.”

**Week Two: Selecting Syntax & Sentence Structure**
Practice building syntax grids.
Read Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral.”

**Week Three: Nonverbal Dialogue**
How can we use gesturing and body language to our advantage in dialogue construction?
Read Denis Johnson’s “Emergency.”

**Week Four: The Dreaded Information Dump**
How can we organically get backstory and context to our readers?
Read Dorothy Allison’s “River of Names.”

**Week Five: Modulations in Mood**
Techniques to have fluid movement among the spectrum of emotion.
Read John Edgar Wideman’s “Daddy Garbage.”
**Week Six: Direct vs. Indirect Dialogue**
Sometimes we need to speak in direct dialogue (he said/she said), while other times it’s more economical to use indirect dialogue, a powerful and oft overlooked color on our literary palette.
Read Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl.”

**Week Seven: Opaque Answers**
Too often our characters are unbelievably polite and thorough. This week we practice rendering people not being totally honest/available/forthright.
Read Tim O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried.”

**Week Eight: Workshop Week**
Three or four writers will post stories/novel excerpts for in-depth workshop response.
The weekly topic will be subtext.
Read Amy Tan’s “Rules of the Game.”

**Week Nine: Workshop Week**
Three or four writers will post stories/novel excerpts for in-depth workshop response.
The weekly topic will be compression.
Read Mary Gaitskill’s “A Romantic Weekend.”

**Week Ten: Workshop Week**
Three or four writers will post stories/novel excerpts for in-depth workshop response.
The weekly topic will be revision.
Read Jayne Anne Phillips’ “Home.”