

## 98-252: Wordplay: Fundamentals of Scrabble Strategy

Carnegie Mellon University

Jemmin Chang

[jemmin.chang@cmu.edu](mailto:jemmin.chang@cmu.edu)

[www.contrib.andrew.cmu.edu/~jemminc/98-252](http://www.contrib.andrew.cmu.edu/~jemminc/98-252)

## Spring 2016 Syllabus

### Course Description

Contrary to popular belief, knowledge of obscure words is not the foremost determiner of Scrabble success. This course will cover the strategies and paradigms that advanced players employ to consistently outplay even those with wider vocabularies, including: playing board-first; rack management; anagramming; bingos; exchanging; S, blank, and JQXZ strategy; tile-tracking; board control; endgame finesse; and bluffing and challenging. Beginning with the rules of Scrabble, the course does not presume any prior experience and is absolutely accessible to beginners. Classes will follow a structure of alternating lessons and workshops where students will have the opportunity to practice skills with each other in real Scrabble games.

### Class Schedule

Week 1: Workshop: introduction to tournament Scrabble

Week 2: Lesson 1: Playing board-first Scrabble

Week 3: Workshop: Playing board-first Scrabble

Week 4: Lesson 2: Finding good words: rack management, bingos, and anagramming

Week 5: Workshop: Finding good words

Week 6: Lesson 3: What's in the bag? S, blanks, JQXZ, and keeping track of it all

Week 7: Workshop: What's in the bag?

Week 8: Midterm exam

Week 9: Lesson 4: Board control: opening, closing, beginning, and ending

Week 10: Workshop: Board control

Week 11: Mini-Lesson: Phonics: bluffing and challenging; *Word Wars: Tiles and Tribulations on the Scrabble Circuit*

Week 12: Workshop: Final review

Week 13: Final exam

Week 14: Class-determined special activity

## Assignments

Students will be expected to play at least one Scrabble game per week, either in person or on the ISC (see Resources). Additionally, there will be 4 written assignments assigned after each of the 4 main lessons; these consist of targeted exercises to reinforce the concepts taught in class.

## Exams

There will be a midterm and a final. Both will be given in class, and will follow a format similar to the assignments. As a fun alternative to the paper final exam, students can challenge the instructor to a tournament game of Scrabble with certain handicaps. If the student(s) wins or ties, they receive a 100% on the final and don't have to take the paper exam. If the student(s) loses, they can either take 100 minus the score difference as their final exam grade, or take the paper exam.

## Grading

This course is graded pass/fail. Students must achieve an average of 60% to pass. Averages are calculated as follows:  $\text{avg} = (0.3 * \text{final exam grade} + 0.2 * \text{midterm grade} + 0.4 * \text{written assignment average} + 0.1 * \text{participation grade}) * (14 - \text{unexcused absences}) / 14$

The participation grade is the instructor's subjective evaluation of the student's engagement in workshop Scrabble games. Arriving on time, focusing fully on the game, cooperating well with partners and opponents, and following the NASPA Scrabble rules will ensure a high participation grade.

## Attendance

Students are expected to attend all classes, except when unavoidable absences are communicated to and excused by the instructor *ahead of time* (at least 2 days), excepting documented medical/family emergencies. Unexcused absences will affect a student's grade severely (see Grading). Per StuCo policy, any student who accumulates more than 2 unexcused absences *cannot be given a pass*, regardless of the student's average.

## Resources

The course website ([www.contrib.andrew.cmu.edu/~jemminc/98-252](http://www.contrib.andrew.cmu.edu/~jemminc/98-252)) will be the hub for all course materials and resources. Students can complete homework, view lecture notes, check grades and comments, and find links to useful Scrabble resources on this website.

Students will be required to create a free account on the Internet Scrabble Club (ISC) and download the WordBiz application at [www.isc.ro](http://www.isc.ro) if they wish to play their games online. Additional useful Scrabble resources are:

- Wapnick, Joel. *How to play Scrabble like a champion*. New York: Puzzlewright Press, 2010. (Interesting study: take a look at the 1986 original edition, and note how Wapnick's strategy has changed hugely mostly as a result of computer analysis.)
- Edley, Joe and John D. Williams, Jr. *Everything Scrabble, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition*. New York: Pocket Books, 2009.
- And dozens of other Scrabble resources online. Be sure to check dates for currency.

## Cheating Policy

Students may not work with other students on homework or exams. We will do a lot of collaborative work in class, so it's important for you to gain experience thinking and playing Scrabble on your own, as all tournament games are played.

Students must abide by all university policies regarding cheating, plagiarism, etc. You may not refer to other people or computer programs while completing homework (the written exercises and playing Scrabble) or exams except when explicitly instructed otherwise.

Any attempt to hack or abuse the course website or related technological infrastructure will also be considered cheating.

Any violation of this policy will be reported and dealt with by university officials, and the consequences will not be trivial. If any part of this policy is unclear, please ask me for clarification in person or via email. Please do so *before* doing something that may violate the policy, or the usual consequences will stand.

## Scrabble Dictionary

A revised edition of both the Tournament Word List (TWL) and Official Scrabble Player's Dictionary (OPSD) were published in 2014. Due to errors and copyright issues, it won't take precedence as the official tournament dictionary until towards the end of the semester. Thus, we'll be using the previous edition of the TWL from 2006 as the dictionary source for all games, exercises, homeworks, and exams this semester. A word checker utilizing this dictionary is available on the course website.