In a recent poll taken by the Directors Guild, it was discovered that 75% of their members got their start directing scripts that they wrote or co-wrote. When Alfred Hitchcock and David Lean were asked about film schools and how to teach film directing, both agreed that students should not be given equipment until their second year: “students should first make films with their typewriters.” George Lucas looked back at his education at USC and advised more time should be spent on writing. The comment heard most often from graduating production students and alumni over the years is: "I wish I had spent more time on my writing." In fact many students, upon screening their award-winning thesis films and 546's, were not offered a twenty-five million dollar picture to direct, but asked: "Do you have a script?" Hopefully by the end of CTWR 516 you will have gained a great deal of insight into the workings of feature screenplays, helping you along the path of writing them yourselves.

In this class we will share the experience of viewing and enjoying a number of films - made at different times and with contrasting narrative approaches - and work together to discover how these films were put together, what screenwriting methods
were employed, and how these techniques can help us become better screenwriters and film makers ourselves.

There is no one method, no one story pattern that must be slavishly followed to achieve success in writing screenplays for narrative films. While this course will give you a thorough understanding of three-act structure, we will also focus on more general, fluid screenwriting concepts such as character and character arc, theme, sequence and scene. We will also learn specific techniques: planting and pay-off, deletion (ellipsis), twist, moments of revelation and recognition, exposition, backstory and ways of creating audience identification with the central character (the difference between sympathy and empathy). Most of the analysis will be done from the screenwriter’s point of view, but we will also examine the role of the director, cinematographer, editor, composer, etc.

The analyzed pictures are selected in such a manner that they present diverse narrative techniques, story patterns, structures, styles and genres.

The purpose of this class is to demystify the screenwriting process and to help you to build your own screenwriter's toolbox (a place to go to find ways of fixing your own screenplays.) By learning how other filmmakers solved the very problems you are facing in your own work, you will gain an understanding of how to achieve better screenplays and characters yourself.

This is not a silver bullet. We will not talk about plot points and obligatory page numbers. Remember, you cannot and should never write to the model. But you can use these techniques and story patterns to help tell your own story more clearly and to better effect. This is not a cookie cutter course: we want to inspire you to tell yours stories in the most original and effective way possible.

Class requirements: Films are screened in class, some more than once. Attendance is a part of the grade. **You must attend class regardless of whether you have seen the film twenty times before.** Class participation is essential - I'd like us to have a dialogue about the films. There will be a MIDTERM and a FINAL. There will be some reading required.
Many of the screenplays of the films we will see are available in the cinema library or on-line. Students should read these. Also, any student serious about making films should be reading and analyzing at least one screenplay a week. The Doheny library has screenplays for this purpose, as does the small library in the SCA Writing Division.

Suggested reading:

THE TOOLS OF SCREENWRITING by David Howard

THE WRITER’S JOURNEY by Christopher Vogler

SCREENWRITING: THE SEQUENCE APPROACH by Paul Gulino.

These texts will definitely help your understanding of the course.

Laptop & cell phone policy: Laptops and cell phones may be used in class for the purpose of taking notes only. Browsing the web or checking emails is not acceptable. Laptops and phones may not be used during the screening of the film. Students violating this policy will be asked to leave the classroom. More than one violation will result in a lower final grade. If you need to make a call or text, go outside of the classroom.

COURSE GOALS AND ASSIGNMENTS:

1. To expose students to the work of accomplished screenwriters and directors. By analyzing effective films and screenplays we will teach filmmakers to understand this work from a professional perspective: not “I liked it” but “Did it work? If so, why?”

2. To teach writers the basics of good dramaturgy: conflict, tension, theme, character and character development.

3. To help writers understand the process of visualization: how do you tell your story visually using character, location, props, action and activity.

4. To familiarize writers with story patterns, especially three-act structure.

5. To help writers develop an understanding of screenwriting techniques such as: planting and payoff,
polarity, sequence, character arc, scenes of recapitulation, revelation and recognition.

6. To study genre and how filmmakers use and break genre conventions to make their stories fresh and original.

ASSIGNMENTS:

Note: since each film will be demonstrating many the techniques and patterns mentioned above, the weekly objective will be fluid; there will be constant review and comparison. However the films have been chosen to explore specific aspects of screen story telling:

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

(Films are subject to change)


• February 17: Bridesmaids, Paul Feig, Annie Mumolo, Kristen Wiig.

• February 24: Up In The Air, Jason Reitman, Sheldon Turner.

• March 3: (MIDTERM)

• March 10: In Bruges, Martin McDonagh.

• MARCH 17: SPRING BREAK. NO CLASS.

• March 24: Groundhog Day, Harold Ramis, Danny Rubin.
• March 31: *Pulp Fiction* - Quentin Tarantino

• April 7: *Finding Nemo*, Andrew Stanton, Lee Unkrich.

• April 14: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Charlie Kaufman, Michel Gondry.

• April 21: *Ocean’s 11*, Steven Soderberg, Ted Griffin.

• April 28: FINAL EXAM.

**EVALUATION CRITERIA:**

CNTV 516 grades will be based on careful consideration in the following areas of the students’ work:

• **Class participation.** The willingness to engage the instructor in discussion of the weekly film........10%

• Out of class assignments...........10%

• Midterm........................................30%

• Final.............................................50%

Class participation includes full involvement in and contribution to class discussions.

**Class attendance is mandatory, and includes being on time to class.**

You are allowed one unexcused absence (documentation required for excused absences). Beyond one, you will receive a reduction of one-third letter grade for each unexcused absence. (e.g., A- down to B+, B down to B-)

Tardiness is unprofessional, and so will be considered unacceptable. You will be allowed one unexcused tardiness. After that, you will have your grade lowered by one-third letter grade for each occurrence. BE ON TIME.
**Note**: Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure this letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.– 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The telephone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

**Statement on Academic Integrity**

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one’s own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another’s work as one’s own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. Scampus, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/. Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at: http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/. 