Course Objective:

Everyone has at least one good story in them, and the goal of this class is to help you find and craft yours -- ultimately in the form of a 10-20 page screenplay to be turned in at the end of the semester. Along the way, we’ll be learning the basic building blocks of screenwriting – three-act structure, visual storytelling, character-driven plotting, tone, theme, and emotional veracity. Additionally, my goal is to help you hone your most valuable asset as a writer -- your personal voice.

Course Description:

Each class will consist of a workshop where we will read and discuss a series of weekly assignments. This will be followed by a discussion and visually aided exercise exploring the week’s Core Question, such as “How do I make the reader care about my protagonist?”, “How do I build tension and conflict within my scenes?”, “What are the differences between good dialogue and bad dialogue?”, etc. As the semester progresses, each student will craft a pitch for their final project, develop an outline, and do at least one set of revisions on their finished short screenplay.

Course Reading:

Required reading: THE NEW ELEMENTS OF STANDARD SCREENPLAY FORMAT by Jean-Paul Ouellette. Additional reading will explore how different writers use voice and tone, establish and develop character, and tell a rich, compelling story within a short timeframe. I’ll be providing copies of Tobias Wolfe’s short story “Bullet In The Brain”, as well as sections of screenplays by writers such as the Coen Brothers, William Goldman, Joss Whedon, Shane Black, and Vince Gilligan. We’ll also be reading One-Page Screenplays, an online collection of short scripts crafted by well-known screenwriters.

Script Format:

You will be required to write in standard script format. There are numerous software programs available. And remember, everything that you turn in is going to be read by everyone in class, so for the sake of looking like a respectful professional (and not a lazy hack), make sure your work is proofread for typos, grammar, and dropped words. Same rule of the industry applies to class: presentation matters.

Assignments:

Homework assignments are to be turned in to me no later than 5 PM on Monday night (i.e. the night before our next class.) Turn in your work on time; consistently late work will cost you a grade. If you cannot make a class, be sure that someone hands in your homework for you, or if that’s not possible, please make an arrangement with me. Assignments will be read and discussed in class. You may use your laptops but be
sure to bring a paper copy of your assignment for me.

**Grading Criteria:**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigned Scenes</td>
<td>30% (6 scenes, each worth 5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigned Sequence</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Short Script</td>
<td>25%</td>
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</tbody>
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100%

As per Writing Division policy the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>100% to 94%</td>
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<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>93% to 90%</td>
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<td>B+</td>
<td>89% to 87%</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>86% to 83%</td>
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<td>B-</td>
<td>82% to 80%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>72% to 70%</td>
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<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>69% to 67%</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>66% to 63%</td>
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<td>D-</td>
<td>62% to 60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>59% to 0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Writing Division Attendance Policy:**

Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Two unexcused absences will result in your grade being lowered by one full point (ex: A to a (A-)). A third unexcused absence will result in your grade being lowered another full point (ex: B to a (B-)). Your grade will be lowered by one point for every absence after. Two late arrivals equates to one full absence.

In order for absence to be excused the student must have approval from the professor and provide documentation at the next attended class session.

Please note that if you are a Writing for Screen and Television major/minor you must receive a grade of a C or better in order to receive degree credit. If you have any questions about the minimum grade required for credit please check with your home department.

If you have an emergency and must miss class please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

**Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:**

While in class, laptops and cell phones are to be used for work relating to what is being discussed. Anything other than that is strictly prohibited.

**Class Schedule:**

Please note that all dates are subject to change at the discretion of the professor.

**January 13:** Introduction and reading of syllabus. Talk about what films and writers inspire you. Core Question: “What is screenwriting?” Discuss differences between prose and filmic writing. Discuss formatting. Diagram three-act structure. Discuss visual storytelling. Read “Bullet In The Brain” and selected One Page Screenplays. Write a scene where a specific mood/tone is established.

**Assignment:** Buy copy of THE NEW ELEMENTS OF STANDARD SCREENPLAY FORMAT. Write your own one-page screenplay with no dialogue. Watch the short film “A Thousand Words.”
January 20: Core Question: “What is character?” Explore the four types of stories and how they relate to the four types of character arcs. Discuss the ways in which character-driven storytelling can flourish in short-form writing. Discuss the components of a three-dimensional character – voice, attitude, point-of-view, inner conflict, want/need, flaws, backstory, etc.

ASSIGNMENT: Read selected chapters from THE NEW ELEMENTS OF STANDARD SCREENPLAY FORMAT. Write a scene that introduces us to a character and reveals who they are as a person through behavior, action, and dialogue.

January 27: Read/discuss last week’s pages. Core Question: “What makes an audience want to follow a character?”

ASSIGNMENT: Read selected chapters from THE NEW ELEMENTS OF STANDARD SCREENPLAY FORMAT. Write a 1-2 page character biography.

February 3: Read/discuss last week’s pages. Watch “ABOUT A BOY.”

ASSIGNMENT: Finish reading THE NEW ELEMENTS OF STANDARD SCREENPLAY FORMAT.

February 10: Finish watching ABOUT A BOY. Analyze film. Core question: “How do I create a strong relationship?” Read examples of great dialogue and what it reveals (or obscures) about the character delivering it. Read examples of bad dialogue and discuss why it doesn’t work. Discuss dialogue as an extension of a character’s behavior and as a way to express conflict. Read examples that demonstrate the difference between text and subtext. Discuss how a character’s personality and history will effect how that person expresses him/herself.

ASSIGNMENT: Write a scene with a clear conflict between two characters that’s expressed through dialogue. Have your protagonist resolve (or fail to resolve) the conflict in an unexpected way that moves the story forward.

February 17: Read/discuss last week’s pages. Core question: “How do I create conflict and tension within a scene?” Watch and discuss a clip from a movie with a strong, clear conflict and palpable tension. Discuss external vs. internal conflict, and how each is expressed effectively. Read scenes from screenplays demonstrating strong examples of each. Discuss obstacles, creative ways to complicate your hero’s situation, and “C-choices.”

ASSIGNMENT: Read and analyze the screenplay for the SOCIAL NETWORK.

February 24: Read/discuss last week’s pages. Core question: “What is GSU and why is it so important?” GSU stands for Goals, Stakes, Urgency – and they’re the key elements of dramatic storytelling. “What does the hero want?” “What happens if he/she doesn’t get it?” “Why does he/she need to make this happen right now?” We’ll be viewing and discussing some short films in class that exemplify GSU done right, as well as some that do it wrong. Finally, we’ll be doing an in-class exercise called “Boring Story Rescue”, where we focus on GSU as a way to make un-compelling stories more engaging.

ASSIGNMENT: Write a dialogue driven scene between two characters. One of them wants to leave a location, the other one wants them to stay. Make sure your scene has GSU (Goals, Stakes, Urgency.) Make sure each character has their own distinct voice and attitude. Have the conflict escalate (as opposed to repeating itself) and ultimately resolve. Have the scene include a moment where a character delivers a monologue about something important to them.

March 3: Read/discuss last week’s pages. Core Question: “What is a sequence and how do I create one?” Discuss sequencing, how one scene builds on another to push the story its conclusion. Screen clips of famously well made sequences, what role they serve within the movie, and how they advance the film’s storyline.
ASSIGNMENT: Add scenes to your dialogue driven scene from last week, in order to build it into a sequence.

March 10: Read/discuss last week’s sequences. Core question: “How do I wrangle the two-headed beast of ‘character arc’ and ‘theme?’” Talk about how theme is expressed through character growth. Talk about the “dramatic question” that exists within every good story, and how the story’s theme is expressed through answering it. Show clips of how theme is expressed through character; films most likely will include FINDING NEMO, BLADE RUNNER, and PULP FICTION. Discuss the ways a well-executed character arc is the key to a satisfying story.

ASSIGNMENT: Write three one-paragraph premises three premises to pitch in class for your final project

March 17: Spring Break – no class

March 24: Pitch premise for final script. Discussion and approval of premise. Discuss turning premise into an outline for the final script.

ASSIGNMENT: Create an outline based on discussion of premise.

March 31: Discussion and reworking of outlines.

ASSIGNMENT: revise outline

April 7: Share new outlines. Discuss writing vs rewriting, and the ultimately collaborative nature of screenwriting. Do an in-class exercise about how to make notes and revisions work for you. Discussion of all we’ve covered up to this point (visual storytelling, character, dialogue, sequencing, voice, etc.)

ASSIGNMENT: Begin writing final script

April 14, April 21, April 28: Workshop final scripts.

ASSIGNMENT: Rewrite final scripts

Finals Week: Turn in revised final scripts.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Section 11, Behavior Violating University Standards https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the Office of Equity and Diversity http://equity.usc.edu or to the Department of Public Safety http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us.
Support Systems

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the American Language Institute http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. The Office of Disability Services and Programs http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, USC Emergency Information http://emergency.usc.edu will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

Disruptive Student Behavior

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students’ ability to learn and an instructor’s ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.