
USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS

CTWR 413: Writing the Short Script 1
SPRING 2017 SYLLABUS (2 Units)

Instructor: Anne McIntyre Postman
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Section #: 19185D

Time: FRIDAY 10:00a-12:50p
Location: SCB 304
Office hours: By appointment,
preferably before or after class

GOALS OF THIS COURSE:

- Introduction to the craft of screenwriting
- To learn and practice the elements of “A good story well told”
- To strengthen and deepen the ability to conceive of compelling ideas, characters and stories through experience and observation
- To learn to write from a visual and aural perspective
- To learn narrative structure
- To learn the building blocks of the dramatic scene
- To write a short script screenplay

This is an introductory course in writing for the screen in which you will learn and develop your craft as a storyteller. You will learn to draw on your memories, experiences, observation, and, of course, your imagination to create compelling characters and stories for the screen.

This is a workshop class. Together we will read and critique a series of weekly assignments, both in and outside the class, designed to help you understand the fundamentals of screenwriting. You will learn how to bring your visual and aural senses to your writing, to see and hear your film as you write it, developing and exploring your characters through situations of conflict.

At the end of the class you will apply your skills to writing a short narrative *6 page CTPR 310 script*.

READING:

You should read as many screenplays as possible to familiarize yourself with the styles and form of other professional writers. **You will be assigned two scripts to read on your own time and must prepare an assignment on them to present in class.** We have a selection posted on our class Blackboard site. Additionally, the following books are highly suggested:

The Tools of Screenwriting, by Howard & Mabley

Creative Filmmaking from the Inside Out, by Dannenbaum, Hodge, Mayer

GRADING:

In-class exercises 30%

Assignments 60%

Participation 10%

Class participation includes full involvement in and contribution to all class discussions, as well as reading the assignments of the other students (often in advance) and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.

Class attendance is mandatory, and includes being on time to class to ensure that all students get an equal amount of time for feedback and discussion of their work.

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- drops to B+, B drops to B-).

BE ON TIME. Tardiness is unprofessional and unacceptable. You will be allowed no more than one unexcused tardy. Further tardiness will result in one-sixth letter grade for each occurrence. If you are on the border between an A- and a B+, a second tardy will push your grade down to B+. No exceptions.

In addition, late assignments will result in lowered grades.

SUBMITTING WORK:

All work must be posted to Blackboard as PDFs 24 hours prior to class, i.e. by Thursday at 10am. In addition, you must bring a hard copy for me.

Scripts must show strict adherence to proper screenplay format and be grammatically correct and free of spelling errors. *Scripts not conforming to these guidelines cannot receive a grade in the A range.*

Please note: I do not accept emailed work.

Please use professional screenwriting software. Final Draft, the industry standard, can be purchased for \$99 while you are a student. Celtx is free, though conversion to PDF's -- required for uploading to our Blackboard site -- can be buggy. Do not use Word or other word processing software; it won't do the trick. All of SCA's computers have Final Draft on them so you can always use one of their computers to complete your assignments.

WRITING DIVISION GRADING BREAKDOWN:

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

A	100% to 94%	C	76% to 73%
A-	93% to 90%	C-	72% to 70%
B+	89% to 87%	D+	69% to 67%
B	86% to 83%	D	66% to 63%
B-	82% to 80%	D-	62% to 60%
C+	79% to 77%	F	59% to 0%

A : Work of **excellent** quality. Outstanding application of the dramatic principles and fulfillment of course requirements and deadlines as specified in the syllabus.

B : Work of **good** quality. Above average fulfillments of course requirements and deadlines.

C : Work of **fair** quality. Minimum fulfillment of course requirements and deadlines for passing graduate credit.

C-: **FAIL to meet minimum grade for credit. NON-PASSING GRADE.**

CLASSROOM POLICY:

No laptops. Sorry. Bring an old-fashioned pad of paper and a pen to take notes.

Assignments will be projected on the screen via Blackboard for all discussions and read-alouds.

No cell phones, either. If they're in your backpack, make sure they are off.

Class participation includes full involvement in and contribution to all class discussions, as well as reading the assignments of the other students and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.

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>. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage sarc@usc.edu describes reporting options and other resources.

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.

<p style="text-align: center;">PLEASE NOTE: FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX</p>
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ASSIGNMENTS & SCHEDULE:

WEEK ONE (JAN 13): ATMOSPHERE & VISUALIZATION

***In-class assignment – “TRIP TO SCHOOL”**

Creating a sense of place and atmospheric locations are part of the writer’s job. Lighting, time of day, weather, architecture, use of sound, props and objects all help create mood and the world of your story.

- List the places you went to school starting as far back as you can remember.
- List how you got to each school. Pick the emotionally “hottest” place/trip.
- List things, places, activities, people, clothes connected with that trip.
- Now describe the trip, telling us about how you got to school. (Your description may be bullet-pointed, as you will be asked to tell the class about the trip rather than read your description.)

Each assignment is **due the week it’s described. For example, your “Roommates” assignment is actually due next class. **Pick out feature Screenplay #1 to read and report on. Must be approved by me. Start reading!***

WEEK TWO (JAN 20): ROOMMATES

Roommates. Non-dialogue. Designed to introduce characters through visuals and props -- and conflict -- without seeing or hearing the characters themselves. In three parts.

*First part: Describe through sight and sounds a significant space shared by two interesting characters who are living together in **harmony**.*

*Second part: Describe the same space, but now the characters are in apparent **conflict**.*

*Third part: One of the characters is now **gone**, the remaining one has the location to his or herself. This should not be a guessing game. The point is to engage the audience and let us clearly know who these people are, and what the conflict is about. The elements in the second part ought to be **planted** in the first part, and may be missing or changed, or used again in the third.*

**Remember, don’t show the actual characters!*

Length: A page and a half tops. May be written in Screenplay format, but not required for this assignment. **Continue reading Screenplay #1.**

WEEK THREE (JAN 27): PREPARATION FOR A DATE or SIGNIFICANT EVENT

Also designed to build audience engagement and expectations. Introduces the use of props, costume, and character-revealing activity and action. Helps the writer practice time ellipsis, the technique of planting and payoff, and/or repetition with a variation. And, of course, **preparation and aftermath**. In two parts.

*Pick an interesting character and place him or her **alone** in a location **significant** to that character. (A home, an office, a combat bunker.) Show the character preparing for some character-revealing event, such as a crucial job interview, a romantic liaison, a murder, an encounter with aliens. Whatever. The point is to show through props and movement not only what the event is, but how the character feels about what's about to happen. This should not be a guessing game. We are not given clues, but glimpses into the character's hopes and fears. It should be crystal clear what the event is when the character leaves the location.*

Then, ellipse time and show the character's return. (Note: we do not see the primary scene of the event!) But when the character returns to his home, office, aircraft hanger, abandoned vehicle... we should know exactly what happened and how the character feels about it by changes in demeanor, costume, props, etc.

Length: No more than a page total. Must be written in screenplay format and uploaded to Blackboard as a PDF. **Continue reading Screenplay #1.**

WEEK FOUR (FEB 3): OBSERVATION

- Selection and Observation.

1- Go to an open public place – outdoor market, a mall, a metro station – busy, with a range of people. Have a drink and watch until someone really captures your attention. Then observe everything you can about them. The figure, clothes, walk, the things they carry, particular movements, gestures, haircut. **Don't follow them. Don't write anything.** Once you're certain you have your person and have really studied them, go home.

2 - Write as much detail as you can on a 3x5 file card. Put it in an envelope. Seal it. Get out a phone book (or some 21st Century equivalent). Open randomly. Put a finger on a surname. Write it on the envelope. Then do the same for the first name. Onto the envelope. Do the same for an address. Onto the envelope. You're done for the day. Repeat your trip on the next day. Pick another person. Another return home to record the observations. Another envelope with first and family name and address.

3- On the third day, read the outside of the two envelopes and then open them. Place the cards side by side. Ask: "What would Character X do to Character Y to

provoke Character Y to an extreme action?”

If that's not enough, ask: "What is the tragic secret that either of them has, that he or she would kill to preserve?" Then write a short story built around these two characters and that conflict.

Length: 2 – 3 pages. Prose format. **Complete Screenplay assignment (to be explained).**

WEEK FIVE (FEB 10): Dialogue Scene – “WRONGEST” PERSON / INTRUDER

The "Wrongest" Person. A dialogue scene between **two** characters. Should build and employ many of elements already introduced (especially "Preparation for a Date"). Preparation, planting and pay-off, etc. (For some reason, writers tend to forget the simplest elements, like sound and light to help the audience expect a romantic or violent scene...) Designed to reveal character through conflict, to build suspense through cross-cutting and a ticking clock, and to practice dialogue -- including attitude, vernacular/voice, scene/plot advertising, exposition.

Character A prepares some location for character B's arrival, but character C shows up instead! This should be, from what we know of character A and his/her plans, the absolute worst person to appear. Character A must get rid of character C before he/she crosses paths with character B! But, character A cannot come out and say exactly why character C must leave. ("Listen mom, you gotta leave because I was about to smoke crack with my favorite girl..." that cannot happen.) For this to work, the audience must know what is being planned and the stakes involved. Also, character C must be entirely motivated to stay. (Mom is sick and took the day off, for example.)

The scene ends immediately when Character B arrives, whether Character A is successful in getting rid of character C, or not.

Length: As long as it needs to be, but not more than 3 pages. **Pick Screenplay #2 to read.**

WEEK SIX (FEB 17): Dialogue Scene – SEDUCTION / PERSUASION

The goal of this scene is to explore characters – their past and present relationships. This is a good scene to introduce the concept of exposition through conflict.

One character wants another character to do something. The seducer should know which "buttons" to push. The goal should be appealing to the person being seduced, but that person should have legitimate, character-revealing opposition. This need not be sexual or romantic. The seduction/persuasion should escalate. The scene ends when the seducee agrees or doesn't.

Length: 3-4 pages. **Continue reading Screenplay #2.**

Special Note: CTPR 310 TEACHERS WILL VISIT FOR 20 MINUTES DURING WEEK 6 TO DESCRIBE PARAMETERS OF THE 310 CLASS.

WEEK SEVEN (FEB 24): - PITCHING 310 IDEAS.

Due: Pitch 3 ideas to class as 6-minute 310 scripts. **Continue reading Screenplay #2.**

WEEK EIGHT (MAR 3): - PITCHING 310 IDEAS.

Due: Present refined pitches. **Complete Screenplay #2 Assignment.**

WEEK NINE (MAR 10): REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #1

Due: First draft of 310 script #1.

MARCH 12 - MARCH 19 -- SPRING BREAK -- NO CLASS

WEEK TEN (MAR 24): REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #1

Due: Revised 310 script #1.

WEEK ELEVEN (MAR 31): REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRPT #2

Due: First draft of 310 script #2.

WEEK TWELVE (APR 7): REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #2

Due: Revised 310 script #2.

WEEK THIRTEEN (APR 14): REVIEW & WORKSHOP REWRITTEN 310 SCRIPT.

Due: Third rewrite of 310 script #1.

WEEK FOURTEEN (APR 21): REVIEW REVISIONS.

Due: Third rewrite of 310 script #2.

WEEK FIFTEEN (APR 28): TABLE READS OF FINAL DRAFTS.

Due: Final polish of 310 script - your choice of either #1 or #2. Must conform to required CTPR parameters.

Please note: Final Script is due to CTPR 310 faculty by end of week 15.