

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA  
SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS – WRITING DIVISION**

Course: **CTWR 505 “CREATING THE SHORT FILM” (2 units)**  
Semester: **Spring 2017 / Session 037**  
Section: **19280D**  
Time: **Tuesday, 9-11:50am**  
Classroom: **SCA 342**  
Instructor: **Anne McIntyre Postman**  
Email: **[apmcinty@usc.edu](mailto:apmcinty@usc.edu)**  
Telephone: **213.740.3303**  
Office Hrs: ***By appointment only. Prefer before or after class.***

“Your point of view, which is your voice, your person, isn’t something you have to get. It’s something you have to uncover.”

— Hanif Kureishi, Screenwriter

**COURSE GOAL:**

To strengthen and deepen the ability to conceive and develop ideas that will lead to compelling, authentic, and personally meaningful films.

**SCREENWRITING OBJECTIVES:**

- Learn to write cinematically, through what can be seen and heard
- Learn how to observe and examine real life—and your own experience—to create story and character
- Develop a fundamental understanding of the dramatic scene
- Create tension and conflict
- Write succinct description and action
- Learn the art of cinematic dialogue
- Become familiar with three act structure
- Develop strong concepts for short films
- Recognize the importance of, and practice, rewriting
- Master error-free screenplay format

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

This is an introductory course in writing for the screen in which you will develop your resources as a storyteller -- your memory and observational skills, your responsiveness to the life around you, your knowledge of film stories and conventions, and of course, your artistic imagination. Through a series of exercises meant to sharpen your understanding and practice of the craft, you will

improve your ability to create compelling dramatic characters and cinematic conflict.

The class is structured as a workshop. Together we will read and critique a series of weekly assignments, both non-dialogue and dialogue, designed to help you understand the fundamentals of screenwriting. The focus will be on the major building block of any dramatic work, the scene. You will learn to bring your visual and aural senses to your writing, to see and hear your film as you write it. And you will discover the importance of character as it is explored through situations of conflict. At the end of the class you will apply your skills to the 5-page, CTPR 508 screenplay.

To help you learn format and an expressive, cinematic writing style, I urge you to read as many professional screenplays as possible. You will report to the class on at least two of these. By the fifth week I also expect your assignments to be written in a professional format. I recommend using Final Draft. It's the best software. If you don't already own it, the student version costs \$99. SCA's computers all have Final Draft on them. Celtx is another screenwriting program; it's free, but buggy.

*Please note: assignments not properly formatted will be returned unread.*

Because this is a workshop, students must contribute to all class discussions and invest time and energy in their classmates' stories. If you do not speak in class, I will assume you did not do the work and you will be graded down. Arriving to class a few minutes early, being prepared, meeting deadlines, participating with energy and enthusiasm, and turning in work that is proofread and correctly formatted (if formatting is required) are expected at all times.

**All class work must be based on new, original ideas and completed on your own. No previously written scripts or treatments may be used.**

#### **REQUIRED READING:**

2 produced Feature Screenplays - must be approved by Instructor

#### **SUGGESTED READING:**

*The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writer's Guide to the Craft and Elements of a Screenplay*, by David Howard & Edward Mabley

*Creative Filmmaking From the Inside Out*, Dannenbaum, Hodge, Mayer  
(Fireside, 2003)

**HOW TO SUBMIT YOUR WORK:**

**All work must be posted to Blackboard as a PDF 24 hours prior to class time, i.e. by Monday at 9am. In addition, please bring one hard copy of each assignment for me.**

*Note: I do not accept emailed work.*

- **FORMAT:** Scripts must be typed in 12 pt. Courier and stapled (not paperclipped). Script must show proper screenplay format and be proofread for formatting, spelling and grammatical errors. *Points will be deducted if your script does not conform to these guidelines.*

**GRADING BREAKDOWN:**

*Assignments 65%*

*Final Screenplay 25%*

*Participation 10%*

As per 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%

**WRITING DIVISION ATTENDANCE POLICY:**

Students are expected 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 B+).** 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 via email or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

**CLASSROOM POLICY:**

No laptops in class, please. Please bring an old-fashioned pen and paper. Assignments will be projected on the class screen via Blackboard for all discussions and read-alouds. Cell phones must be turned 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.

**A FEW WORDS OF ADVICE:**

These assignments are designed to challenge you artistically and help you learn to think visually, aurally and emotionally about cinematic storytelling. Here are some tips to help you get the most out of your semester:

- **Some of these assignments will be very difficult for you.** I don't expect flawless work every week, not by a long shot. But I do expect your personal best. Write about people and subjects you care about. Take risks. Be exacting; pay attention to the details. Expect to be held to a rigorous standard -- we will set the bar high and expect you to rise up to it. Be willing to examine your own flaws and failings, for in them will lie some of your best material. Try not to be defensive – we all want to help you improve. Commit to discovering what kind of writer (and person) you are. Begin to develop a voice and a point of view. By the end of the semester you will be, at the very least, a more discerning reader, writer and viewer.
- **Don't wait until the night before to write your assignments!** It always shows. Your first idea of how to tackle an assignment is usually obvious and uninspired. Instead, I strongly suggest you write your assignments **EARLY**, and come back to them after a couple of days to try again. That way, you are allowing your brain time to work unconsciously on solving the assignment "problem," so that when you do a second pass, you will have focus and intention.
- **Read Screenplays!** Research has clearly proven that reading is the best way to substantially improve your writing. That holds for screenwriting, too. **You are required, of course, to read two feature screenplays for the class.** However, I encourage you to get in the habit of reading one screenplay a week as a general practice. You will learn much by seeing how experienced writers create characters, describe a time and place, create and sustain tension, establish a mood, write dialogue, support a theme, etc. etc. Read classics and contemporary screenplays. Many are available on [www.simplyscripts.com](http://www.simplyscripts.com). **Don't** read transcriptions of films—what you'll find on Drew's Script-O-Rama, for example—as they'll teach you nothing. Read actual screenplays. Go the script library on the third floor of SCA and browse. Sit down with the physical script and lose yourself in a brave new world. Enjoy the journey. This is what you came to film school for!

## COURSE SCHEDULE (subject to change)

### WEEK 1 (JAN 10) ELEMENTS OF MISE-EN-SCENE

#### In-class assignment – MOOD & ATMOSPHERE

Designed to build the writer's sense of a visually interesting, emotionally evocative location. The goal is to engage the audience without introducing action -- through light, use of sound, and visuals.

In three parts. Length: No more than a page total. Make the audience expect something to happen. 1. Fear. 2. Romance. 3. Comedy.

Assignment: Pick a cinematic location. Describe the sights and sounds of that location in order to make the audience think something **romantic** is about to take place. The scene ends when your character enters the location. Repeat with the same location, but use the sights and sounds to make the audience expect something **frightening or violent** is going to take place. As before, the scene ends when the same character enters the scene. Repeat a third time using sights and sounds to make the audience expect something **humorous** is about to happen.

These scenes and/or moments are not to be connected into a larger story. Time can pass. (A location that is vibrant and full of life can be run-down and old, for example.) Also, the fear or love or laughs should not come from the character's interaction or movement. The goal is to get the audience to expect something will happen. Cliched example: Show the banana peel, but not the man slipping on it.)

#### Homework for next week:

- 1) Complete "TRIP TO SCHOOL" assignment;
- 2) Choose a Feature Screenplay to start reading for Assignment due Week 4

**DUE WEEK 2 (JAN 17) "TRIP TO SCHOOL"**

- List the places you went to school.
- 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 one trip; tell us the story about how you got to school. (You will be telling this story more than reading it, so don’t overthink the writing.)

**Homework for next week:**

- 1) *Complete “TRUE/FALSE” stories;*
- 2) *Complete “MEMORY” assignment;*
- 3) *Continue reading Feature Screenplay 1*

**DUE WEEK 3 (JAN 24) 1) "TRUE/FALSE" stories; 2) "MEMORY" assignment**

1) Write two small, one to two paragraph stories in prose. One true. One false.

In class we will try to determine which is which, with reasons for our conclusion.  
Do not divulge the truth to your classmates ahead of time or you will spoil the game!! Winning team gets prizes. Length: 1 page.

2) Describe the following MEMORIES:

- My favorite toy as a child.
- A secret place I used to go.
- The most frightening person in my childhood.

Write 1 page each for these three memories, in prose. Describe the specifics of objects, person, place, and the feelings and mood they engendered.

**Homework for next week:**

- 1) *Write a paragraph each about TWO IDEAS you would like to present as options for your non-dialogue Project 1 in 507;*
- 2) *Complete "EXPERIENCE" assignment;*
- 3) *Finish Screenplay 1 and complete Homework Assignment (on Blackboard, under "Assignments")*

**DUE WEEK 4 (JAN 31) 1) GROUP "A" 507 Project 1 Pitches; 2)  
"EXPERIENCE" assignment; 3) Feature Screenplay 1 Homework Assignment**

**1)** Discuss TWO IDEAS for GROUP "A" 507 Project 1 Pitches (5 mins per student)

**2)** Describe, from your own personal EXPERIENCE:

- A moment of great pride and a moment of deep shame.
- A moment of great joy and a moment of absolute terror.

Length: 1 page each, in prose.

**Homework for next week:**

**1)** *Group "B" 507 Project 1 Pitches;*

**2)** *Complete "PREPARATION FOR A DATE / SIGNIFICANT EVENT" assignment in SCREENPLAY FORMAT (preferably Final Draft)*

**DUE WEEK 5 (FEB 7) 1) Group "B" 507 Project 1 Pitches;  
2)"PREPARATION FOR A DATE / SIGNIFICANT EVENT" SCENES**

**1): Discuss TWO IDEAS for GROUP "B" 507 Project 1 Pitches (5 mins/student)**

**2) "PREPARATION FOR A DATE or SIGNIFICANT EVENT" SCENES**

Two short scenes IN SCREENPLAY FORMAT (preferably Final Draft). One scene (1/2 to 1/3 page) of "preparation;" one scene (1/4 page) of "aftermath." Designed to build audience engagement and expectations. Introduces the use of props, costume, and character-revealing activity -- but not necessarily dramatic action. Helps the writer practice time ellipsis, the technique of planting and payoff, and / or repetition with a variation. And preparation and aftermath. No more than a page total, **non-dialogue**.

*Pick an interesting character and place them in a location significant to that character (a home, a combat bunker, a church, etc.) Show them preparing for some character-revealing event, such as a job interview, a murder, a marriage, a confession, an adoption, etc. 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. You are giving us 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. (NB: We do not see the primary event.) But when the character returns to his home, or aircraft hanger, or school auditorium... we should know exactly what happened and how the character feels about it by changes in her demeanor, costume, props, etc.*

**Homework for next week:**

**1) Group "C" 507 Project 1 Pitches**

**2) Short SCENE based on one of your personal experiences explored during Weeks 1-4, in screenplay format**

**DUE WEEK 6 (FEB 14) 1) Group "C" 507 Project 1 Pitches; 2) PERSONAL EXPERIENCE SCENE**

**1)** Discuss TWO IDEAS for GROUP "C" 507 Project 1 Pitches. (5 mins / student)

**2)** Write a short SCENE (in screenplay format) based on one of your personal experiences explored during Weeks 1-4. 1-2 pages.

Making use of the reactions and notes you received from your classmates, craft a scene inspired by your experience. You needn't use the whole experience if you don't want to; a part is fine. The point is, in as few words as possible, you want to introduce a character, set a mood, establish a main tension with stakes, use sound and visuals, and show an interesting event and outcome. Be as spare and to-the-point as you possibly can, while still keeping us engaged and eager to find out what happens. Remember, "get to the party late and leave early."

**Homework for next week:**

**1)** "WRONGEST PERSON" assignment;

**2)** *Begin reading Screenplay 2*

**DUE WEEK 7 (FEB 21) "WRONGEST" PERSON/INTRUDER (dialogue scene)**

**The "Wrongest" Person.** A dialogue scene between two characters. Should build and employ many of elements already introduced. Preparation, planting and pay-off, etc. (For some reason, writers tend to forget the simplest, 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.

Length: As long as it needs to be, but hopefully not more than 3 or 4 pages.

*Character A prepares some location for character B's arrival, but character C shows up instead! This should be, for what we know of character A and his/her plans, the absolute worst person. 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.*

**Homework for next week:**

- 1) Write a paragraph for two ideas for 507 Project 2 films;
- 2) Complete and "SIGNIFICANT OBJECT" assignment;
- 3) *Finish reading Screenplay 2 and complete Homework Assignment*

**DUE WEEK 8 (FEB 28) 1) GROUP “A” 507 Project 2 Pitches; 2) SIGNIFICANT OBJECT (dialogue scene); 3) Screenplay 2 Assignment**

**Part 1)** DISCUSS two ideas for GROUP “A” 507 PROJECT 2 PITCHES. (5 mins per student)

**Part 2)** Dialogue Scene – SIGNIFICANT OBJECT. Length: 3 to 4 pages.

The goal of this scene is to build audience’s expectations by using a significant prop. This scene should employ many of the elements practiced so far, including preparation, use of light and sound, manipulating time, motivated opposing characters, suspense and surprise, reversal and character change.

*A character prepares for a significant encounter and plans to use a certain object. Because of the conflict with a second (or more) character(s) the prop ends up being used in an entirely different way. Cheap gift perfume; a failed apology; the perfume is used as poison, etc. Take the time to come up with an original take on this setup. Originality will be rewarded.*

**Homework for next week:**

1) *Group “B” 507 Project 2 pitches;*

2) *Prepare three ideas for short documentaries: a portrait of a place, a portrait of a person, and a portrait of a process. Bring in a newspaper article or web download you used to research doc ideas.*

**DUE WEEK 9 (MAR 7) GROUP “B” 507 Project 2 Pitches and DOCUMENTARY IDEAS**

**Part 1)** DISCUSS two ideas for GROUP “B” 507 PROJECT 2 PITCHES. (5 mins per student)

**Part 2)** DISCUSS one of your documentary ideas (person, place or process).

**Homework for next class:**

1) *Group “C” 507 Project 2 pitches;*

2) *“CREATIVE LIE” dialogue scene.*

**MARCH 12 – MARCH 19 – SPRING BREAK – NO CLASS**

**DUE WEEK 10 (MAR 21) 1) GROUP "C" 507 Project 2 Pitches; 2) "CREATIVE LIE"**

**Part 1)** DISCUSS two ideas for GROUP "C" 507 PROJECT 2 PITCHES. (5 mins per student)

**Part 2)** CREATIVE LIE dialogue scene.

**Creative lie.** Dialogue scene between two characters. As with all the others, the writer should employ elements practiced all semester, including suspense, engaging audiences' hopes and fears, surprise, mystery, escalation, distinctive dialogue.

Length: 4-5 pages.

*A character tells a lie to either pursue some objective or to escape some trouble. The audience must know it is a lie. The lie should escalate. The person being lied to should be entirely motivated to block the character's goal.*

**Homework for next week:**

*Complete "SEDUCTION / PERSUASION" dialogue scene.*

**DUE WEEK 11 (MAR 28) SEDUCTION / PERSUASION (Dialogue Scene)**

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.

Length: 3-4 pages.

*Somebody 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.*

**Homework for next week:**

- 1) *Prepare 5 one-sentence ideas for 508 SCRIPT.*

**DUE WEEK 12 (APR 4) CTPR 508 and THE SHORT SCRIPT 1**

- *Pitch 508 project.* Students pitch ideas in class for feedback. More detailed instructions to come.

**DUE WEEK 13 (APR 11) THE SHORT SCRIPT 2**

- *508 Draft 1 due.* Students discuss.

**DUE WEEK 14 (APR 18) THE SHORT SCRIPT 3**

- *508 Draft 2 due.* Students discuss.

**DUE WEEK 15 (APR 25) THE SHORT SCRIPT final – LAST CLASS MEETING**

- Course evaluations completed.
- Students turn in a **HARD COPY** of their **FINAL REVISED SHORT SCREENPLAY**. Scripts must be typed in 12 pt. Courier and stapled (not paperclipped). Script must show proper screenplay format and be proofread for formatting, spelling and grammatical errors. *Points will be deducted if your script does not conform to these guidelines.*
- **Please note:** No scripts accepted on Blackboard or by email. No late scripts accepted.

*Congratulations, and have a great summer!*

## **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](mailto: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](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.

### **PLEASE NOTE:**

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