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## USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS

### *CTWR 412: Intro to Screenwriting* SPRING 2017 SYLLABUS (2 Units)

Instructor: Siavash Farahani  
Email: karma@karmafilm.com  
Class meets: WED, 4-6:50 PM  
Location: SCA 214  
Section: # 19351D  
Office hours: By appointment

#### **COURSE DESCRIPTION & OBJECTIVE:**

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

The objective of this course is to learn a professional approach to writing a screenplay from conception of the idea through the outlining process and onto a finished short script. The focus will be on learning how to break a story, develop an idea, create character arcs, and craft your idea into a three act structure. To learn and practice the elements of a "Good Story Well Told". To write from a visual an aural perspective. To develop good writing habits while discovering your creative voice.

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 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.

There will be weekly reading and writing assignments. At the end of the class you will apply your skills to writing an outline and then a screenplay for a short film or the first act of a feature film (25-30 pages). The focus will be on creating original, complex characters while developing a strong story and scene structure. All ideas, loglines, pitches, beat sheets, character bios and detailed outlines will be discussed aloud in class, with constructive discussions to follow.

#### **READING/VIEWING:**

There will be a dropbox folder with recent scripts. You are expected to read some of

these on your own time. On occasion you will be assigned a script to read inside or outside of class for group discussion.

We will also watch scenes/films in class and you will be assigned films to watch outside of class.

**Required reading:**

*"Making a Good Script Great"* by Linda Seeger

*"Save the Cat"* by Blake Snyder

**Suggested reading:**

*"The Tools of Screenwriting"* by Howard & Mabley

*"Creative Filmmaking From the Inside Out"* by Dannenbaum, Hodge, Mayer

**CLASS REQUIREMENTS:**

- 1) Completion of all weekly assignments with the final goal of writing the outline and script for a short film (25-30 pages) OR the first act of a feature screenplay (25-30 pages).
- 2) Your assignments will be discussed in class so your work needs to be uploaded to the class dropbox folder **prior to class in PDF, titled with your name and name of assignment.**
- 3) Group Interaction: Students will be required to read each other's work, and provide constructive feedback to their fellow writers in class. Because this class is a workshop students must contribute to all class discussions and read their classmates' stories. Being prepared, meeting deadlines and participating with enthusiasm is expected at all times.
- 4) Assignments are to be completed in proper format, and submitted by specified due dates as discussed in class. Proper grammar and spelling are expected. Consistently late work will cost you a grade.
- 5) All class work must be based on new, original ideas and completed on your own. No previously written scripts or treatments may be used. Plagiarism is a serious violation of academic integrity and will be reported for disciplinary action.
- 6) Your final grade will be based on your written work as well as your consistent attendance, punctuality, ability to meet deadlines and contribution to a productive workshop environment for all.

SCRIPT FORMAT: All scripts will be written in standard script format using professional screenwriting software FINAL DRAFT. (More on format at end of syllabus).

**GRADING:**

*Assignments 40%*

*Final Outline/Bio 20%*

*Final script 30%*

*Participation 10%*

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

**Late assignments will not be accepted.**

**All work must be delivered in proper format and as a PDF uploaded to the class dropbox, prior to class**

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.**

**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 B).

A third unexcused absence will result in your grade being lowered another full point (ex: B to C). Two late arrivals equate 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.

#### **COMPUTER USE:**

Laptops and tablets may be used in class for class related matters. Their use beyond class related matters can result in loss of the privilege to use them.

Cell phone use is not permitted during class time, barring a life or death emergency.

**OFFICE HOURS:** By appointment.

### **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 of the 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.htm](http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.htm) 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;"><b>PLEASE NOTE: FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX</b></p>
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### **ASSIGNMENTS & SCHEDULE**

## **WEEK 1 - January 11**

Introductions & Class overview

Lecture: "A Good Story Well Told"

Read first sequence of Moonlight screenplay in class. Watch corresponding film scenes.

Review screenplay format.

### **Assignment:**

1. Read Seger Chapter 1 "Gathering Ideas"

2. Read Snyder Chapter 1 "What is it?"

3. Writing exercise: "ATMOSPHERE":

Designed to build the writer's sense of a visually dynamic 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. A. fear. B. Romance. C. Comedy.

*The 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. Example: Show the banana peel, but not the man slipping....)*

## **WEEK 2 - January 18**

Read Atmosphere assignments in class and discuss.

Discuss readings from Seeger and Snyder.

Lecture: Structure, Character arc, scene structure.

Watch scenes and discuss.

**Assignment:**

1. Read Seeger Chapter 6 "Creating the Scene"
2. Read Snyder Chapter 2 "Same thing only different"
3. Writing assignment: "PREPARATION AND AFTERMATH"

Write 2 scenes in screenplay format. **NO DIALOGUE. No more than 1 page for each scene.**

*A)The first scene -- Preparation for a date or other significant event, revealing state of characters without dialogue. Pick an interesting character and place him or her in a location significant to that character. (A home, an office, a combat bunker.) Show that character preparing for some character-revealing event, such as a date, a crucial job interview, a murder, a confession, 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 (We do not see the primary scene of the event.)*

*B)The second -- Aftermath of the date/event. Without dialogue we should understand what happened on that date. Was it a success? Was it disappointing? When the character returns to his home, or aircraft hanger, or office... we should know exactly what happened and how the character feels about it by changes in demeanor, costume, props, etc.*

**WEEK 3 – January 25**

Discuss Readings. Workshop Student's script pages. Discuss LOGLINES AND writing dialogue.

Screen, analyze and discuss short films.

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Read Seger's Chapter 11 "Finding The Conflict" (p. 186-96).
2. Read Snyder's Chapter 3 "It's about a guy who..."
3. Write a scene (3-5 pages) with dialogue and conflict with two or more characters. Choose one of these premises: A character has a secret and works to hide that secret while the other character(s) want to find the secret. Or... A woman must tell somebody she's pregnant. Her mother? Her partner? Feel free to add your own details and elements that will affect the scene: sex, age, race, physical or mental disability, what historic time period it's set, if the secret is drugs or alcohol maybe the character is under the influence, maybe it's a government secret during war time, etc. Use your imagination. Make it interesting.

Write each scene to a crisis point -- The secret is revealed or not; the characters deal with or don't deal with the pregnancy.

#### **WEEK 4 – February 1**

Discuss readings. Workshop assignments. Watch films/scenes.

##### **ASSIGNMENT:**

Create 3 loglines for your final project either as a short or feature film. Under 30 words each, in the format discussed. Must convey protagonist, catalyst, central conflict/antagonist, setting, tone/genre and hook. To be pitched in next class. Be prepared to discuss why you want to tell these particular stories, what they mean to you, and why they make for a compelling story.

#### **WEEK 5 – February 8**

Pitch loglines to class and choose final project.

Discuss great film openings and character introductions. Discuss character, dialogue and plot. Screen analyze and discuss short films.

##### **ASSIGNMENT:**

1. Read Seger, Chapters 12 & 13; "Creating Multi-Dimensional Characters" and "Character Functions."
2. Snyder Chapter "4 Let's beat it out"

3. Write bios and backstory for your script's protagonist and antagonist. 1 page each. Devote one paragraph each to character's past, present, and future circumstances.

### **WEEK 6 – February 15**

Discuss readings. Workshop character bios. Discuss theme and outlines.

#### **ASSIGNMENT:**

1. Read Seger Chapter 2 "The Three Act Structure: Why You Need It And What To Do With it."
2. Read Snyder Chapter 5 "Building the perfect beast"
3. Write outline for your story including key dramatic beats ie prologue, status quo, catalyst, debate, main tension, midpoint, act ii climax, act iii main tension, resolution, and epilogue.

### **WEEK 7 – February 22**

Workshop outlines. Are the stories compelling? Discuss creating interesting characters. How do characters and story evolve? Break into writing groups.  
MIDTERM EVALUATIONS

#### **ASSIGNMENT:**

1. Read Seger Chapter 7 "Creating A Cohesive Script" (p. 127-136)
2. Read Snyder Chapter 6 "Immutable Laws of Screenplay physics"
3. Everyone revise your outline and begin writing pages. Group A scripts will be work-shopped in the next class.

### **WEEK 8 – March 1**

Workshop group A pages. Is the protagonist and their goals set up? What are the obstacles for the protagonist leading into the second act? Putting yourself and your voice onto the page.

ASSIGNMENT: Group A polish your Act One while Group B write your Act One which will be work-shopped in the next class.

### **WEEK 9 – March 8**

Workshop group B pages. Is the protagonist and their goals set up? What are the obstacles for the protagonist leading into the second act? Putting yourself and your voice onto the page.

ASSIGNMENT: Group B polish your Act One while Group A write your Act Two which will be work-shopped in the next class.

### **WEEK 10 – March 15 ( NO CLASS SPRING BREAK)**

### **WEEK 11 - March 22**

Workshop Group A's Act Two of scripts. At this point is the story working? Where is the protagonist? Where is the plot? What are the subplots? What is the tension building to the third act finale? Discuss what makes good dialogue.

Subtext. Will read examples of dialogue from successful screenplays.

ASSIGNMENT: Group A polish your Act Two while Group B write your Act Two which will be work-shopped in the next class.

### **WEEK 12 - March 29**

Workshop Group B's Act Two of scripts. At this point is the story working? Where is the protagonist? Where is the plot? What are the subplots? What is the tension building to the third act finale? Discuss what makes good dialogue.

Subtext. Will read examples of dialogue from successful screenplays.

Discuss what makes a satisfying ending? Is the conflict resolved? How has the protagonist changed/grown since first encountering the obstacles?

ASSIGNMENT: Group B polish your Act Two while Group A write your Act Three which will be work-shopped in the next class.

### **WEEK 13 – April 5**

Workshop Group A' Act Three of scripts. Are all your plot lines tied up? Is the conflict resolved? How has the protagonist changed/grown?

ASSIGNMENT: Group A Polish your Act Three while Group B write your Act Three, which will be work-shopped in the next class.

Start polishing and revising your entire script.

### **WEEK 14 – April 12**

Workshop Group B' Act Three of scripts. Are all your plot lines tied up? Is the conflict resolved? How has the protagonist changed/grown?

Screen, analyze and discuss films.

ASSIGNMENT: Incorporate all of your notes into revising and rewriting your script into a final draft. Turn in the final drafts of your script which will be work-shopped in the next class.

### **WEEK 15: April 19**

Workshop Group A Scripts

ASSIGNMENT: Keep polishing your scripts.

### **WEEK 16 – April 26 (Last class)**

Workshop Group B Scripts.

Catch up on anything students are unclear about -- story, three act structure, dialogue, character motivation, writing is rewriting, etc.

ASSIGNMENT: Keep polishing your scripts.

### **STUDY PERIOD April 29- May2**

**\*\*\*\*\* FINAL DRAFT DUE MAY 3<sup>rd</sup> by 4pm.**

**Now celebrate.**

## **SCRIPT FORMAT**

All scripts must be submitted professionally formatted. Why? Because if you send a script to a producer or agent, bad formatting will get your script a poor reading. It's like showing up for an interview in your pajamas.

There are variations in script formatting, and some television shows have specific requirements, but for this class we'll be using basic script formatting. I recommend you buy a scriptwriting program like Final Draft, which is the industry standard. It will take a little time to learn it, but it formats for you. Final Draft is available to Cinema students at a discount through the writing division.

If you use Word you can set up the margins and space the hard way or create a template. Instructions on how to create a template are available on the web at WikiHow or you can download one from Writing Academy.

A free screenwriting software called CELTX is available for download online. It has a few glitches but it gets the job done.

On the next page is a sample script page.

FADE IN:

EXT. OFFICE BUILDING - DAY (PRESENT DAY)

It's an office building on a hot summer day. The office is one of those glass boxes, the glass tinted opaque.

EXT. OFFICE BUILDING WINDOW - DAY

One window is different. It shines iridescent, like a puddle in a parking lot, or a soap bubble.

EXT. OFFICE BUILDING - DAY

A man and a teenager are outside, standing in the shade of a tree.

A car pulls up and two men get out. IAN (late twenties) is a little disheveled, unassuming. JON (mid-twenties) is on, energetic. The man, MATTHEW'S FATHER (early fifties) immediately gravitates towards Jon.

MATTHEW'S FATHER

He's in there.

Ian and Jon both look at the window.

IAN

How long has he been in there?

MATTHEW'S FATHER

Since last night.

(to the teenager with him.)

Right?

(to Jon)

I thought about going in after him. I looked through. But I didn't see him. You find people in those things or over there or whatever you call it ... right?

Moment of confusion.

JON

I'm not the, he's the—

IAN

Sorry. I mean, I'm Ian—

They all sort of re-orient themselves.

MATTHEW'S FATHER  
You're the one that finds people?

FADE OUT.

1.) **Font:** Always use Courier. It can be Courier, Courier New, or Courier Final Draft, but it needs to be Courier.

2.) Every script begins with

FADE IN:

And ends with

FADE OUT.

3.) Slug Lines (also called Scene Headings) are at the top of each new scene. A scene is determined by a change of time or location. Scripts are built this way for production and each scene means that production has to set up cameras and lighting and sound in a particular location with a particular set of actors. They get really unhappy when you screw up Slug Lines because it makes it hard for the production crew to schedule when they are going to shoot scenes and get all the people and equipment scheduled to be there.

EXT. OFFICE BUILDING - DAY (PRESENT DAY)

They are always in ALL CAPS. They have three parts. There are two spaces between INT./EXT. and Location, and then space, hyphen, space between Location and Time.

- 1.) INT. or EXT. means Interior or Exterior and tells production if the shot is inside or outside. (Outside often means they have to go scout for a location. Inside might be a location but it is often a sound stage.) Occasionally people use I/E meaning that the shot moves from one to the other.
- 2.) LOCATION (in this case OFFICE BUILDING). This should always be short. If you have a scene set in, say, Laurie's living room and you have other scenes set in her kitchen and bedroom, you can do this two ways. You can say LAURIE'S HOUSE/LIVING ROOM or you can say LAURIE'S LIVING ROOM. But once you chose, make sure that you always use the same description every time you put a scene there. An overstressed and tired Director who is doing a break out at one in the morning (because there is NEVER enough time) might break LAURIE'S HOUSE/LIVING ROOM and LAURIE'S LIVING ROOM as two different places. That's because software like Final Draft will give him a list based on YOUR

SLUGLINE. And Final Draft is stupid as dirt and will read it as two locations. (“But I’m not writing it in Final Draft,” you say. That just means that some P.A. had to convert your script to Final Draft for production. She already hates you. Don’t make the Director hate you, too.)

3.) TIME This can be NIGHT, DAY, AFTERNOON. It can be really specific if, for example, the train is due into Yuma at 4:10 and it’s 4:09.

4.) Action

Action is the text that describes the scene and say what characters are in it.

A man and a teenager are outside, standing in the shade of a tree.

A car pulls up and two men get out. IAN (late twenties) is a little disheveled, unassuming. JON (mid-twenties) is on, energetic. The man, MATTHEW'S FATHER (early fifties) immediately gravitates towards Jon.

The first time a character appears in a script, her name is in all caps, followed by an age and a description. SUE (43) is a large blonde wearing a lot of make-up. After that, don’t give the name in all caps. (The description should never be any longer than the one I just gave. So make it pop.) The first appearance is capitalized so it’s easy to make a list of all the characters to cast them, track their wardrobe, and schedule them.

Action should be kept pretty short, just enough that someone reading the script gets a sense of what’s going on.

If there is a sound that is usually written in all caps. A phone RINGS. That’s so sound knows.

Every slugline is followed by at least one line of action.

5.) CHARACTER NAME always appears every time there’s a line of dialogue. If your character is called Matthew on page one, don’t change it to MATT on page three. That will be read as a different character. Again, many people in production will hate you. And you will look stupid. It’s always in ALL CAPS.

IAN  
How long has he been in there?

Sometimes you’ll have characters you don’t want to name. It’s okay to call them BLOND COP or WAITRESS.

6) DIALOGUE is under the character name. It’s single spaced and follows normal punctuation rules.

7) PARENTHETICALS are explanations about how the dialogue works. Sometimes people write acting directions like (angrily) in a parenthetical. This irritates actors and directors. Mostly use parentheticals when otherwise the dialogue would be confusing.

MATTHEW'S FATHER  
Since last night.  
(to the teenager with him.)  
Right?

There are lots more details about formatting. People argue about formatting. Television scripts are sometimes different (sometimes in a TV script the dialogue is in all caps.) But this will get you started.

For more details, [Scriptfrenzy](#) has a decent guide to more fun things like (V.O.) and (O.S.) and other such things. Script formatting basics are clear, but the details of script formatting are an art form and we'll talk about how a reading script is different from a shooting script and why your scripts may be a little different than the ones you read. (Those are usually shooting scripts.)

But this will get you started and should allow you to format professionally.