
USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS

CTWR 413: Writing the Short Script I SPRING 2016 SYLLABUS (2 Units)

Instructor: Siavash Farahani
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Class meets: Fri, 10AM-12:50 PM
Location: SCB 304
Section: # 19185D
Office hours: By appointment

GOALS OF THIS COURSE:

- Introduction to the craft of screenwriting.
- To learn and practice the elements of a “Good story well told.”
- To strengthen & deepen your ability to conceive 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 basic 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 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 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 *5 page script*.

READING:

There will be a dropbox folder with many recent scripts. You are expected to read some of these on your own time and be prepared to discuss them in class. Additionally the following books are highly suggested:

"The Tools of Screenwriting" by Howard & Mabley

"Save the Cat" by Blake Snyder

"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 (in advance at times; see schedule above) the assignments of the other students and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.

Class attendance is mandatory, and includes being on time to class (otherwise, the students who present their material first are short-changed).

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-)

BE ON TIME. Tardiness is unprofessional, and unacceptable. You will be allowed no more than one unexcused tardiness. Further tardiness will result in one-third letter grade for each occurrence

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.

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/departement-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.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;">PLEASE NOTE: FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX</p>

ASSIGNMENTS & SCHEDULE

WEEK ONE – ELEMENTS OF MISE-EN-SCENE

In class assignment – Part One: ATMOSPHERE

Mood and 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....)

In class – Part Two: TRIP TO SCHOOL

- List the places you went to school.
- List how you got to each school. Pick the hottest place/trip emotionally.
- List things, places, activities, people, clothes connected with that trip.
- Now describe one trip, tell us about how you got to school. (More “telling”, less “reading”.)

WEEK TWO: MEMORY

Describe the following memories:

- My favorite toy as a child.

- A secret place I used to go.
- The most frightening person in my childhood.

1 page each. Describe the specifics of objects, person, place. Feelings and mood they engendered.

WEEK THREE: 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 -- but not necessarily dramatic 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.

Length: No more than a page total.

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 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. Then, ellipse time and show the character's return. (We do not see the primary scene of the event.) But 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 FOUR: EXPERIENCE

Describe:

- My moment of greatest pride and moment of deepest shame.
- My moment of greatest joy and moment of greatest terror.

Length: 1 page each.

WEEK FIVE: 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 family name. Write it on the envelope. Then do the same for the first name. Onto the envelope. Again for an address. Onto the envelope. You're done for the day. Repeat your trip on the next day. Another person. Another return home to record the observations. Another envelope with first and family name and address.

3- On the third day, open the two envelopes. 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.

WEEK SIX: TRUE/FALSE

Write two small, one or two paragraph, stories. One true. One false. Class tries to determine which one is which and why.

WEEK SEVEN: Dialogue Scene – "WRONGEST" PERSON / INTRUDER

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.

WEEK EIGHT: Dialogue Scene – SIGNIFICANT OBJECT

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.

Length: 3 to 4 pages.

WEEK NINE: Dialogue Scene - CREATIVE LIE

Creative lie. Dialogue scene between two characters. Four to five pages. 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.

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. (Think of the bonded warehouse scene in Beverly Hills Cop.)

Length: 3 to 4 pages.

[CTPR 310 TEACHERS MAY VISIT DURING WEEK TEN TO LAY OUT PARAMETERS AND ANSWER QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CLASS.]

WEEK TEN: 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.

Length: 3 or 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.

WEEK ELEVEN: SHORT FILM IDEAS/THE LOGLINE

Create and pitch three ideas/logline for a short film to be potentially produced in 310.

WEEK TWELVE: REVISED LOGLINES/BEAT SHEET

- Pitch revised loglines and beat sheet to class for feedback .

WEEK THIRTEEN: THE SHORT SCRIPT FIRST DRAFT

- Write first draft of short script and receive feedback

WEEK FOURTEEN: THE SHORT SCRIPT SECOND DRAFT

- Deliver the second draft of short script for feedback.

WEEK FIFTEEN: POLISH /FINALIZE SHORT SCRIPT

- Polish and finalize short script.

FINAL DRAFT DUE THE NEXT WEEK, DURING EXAM WEEK BY NOON ON DAY CLASS WOULD NORMALLY FALL.