

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMA-TELEVISION
CTWR 305
Advanced Screenwriting: The Relationship Screenplay
Fall 2016 – (Four Units, 19162)

Instructor: Don Bohlinger
Class Schedule: Monday 10-12:50
Class Location: SCA 345
Office Hours: Monday 1-5, SCA 354, or by appointment
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*“Man is a knot into which relationships are tied.”
~Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*

*It begins with a character, usually, and once he stands up on his feet and begins to move,
all I can do is trot along behind him with a paper and pencil trying to keep up long
enough to put down what he says and does.
- William Faulkner*

Class Overview:

CTWR 305 *Advanced Screenwriting: The Relationship Screenplay* will see you through the development and completion of the first draft of a feature screenplay with an emphasis on your characters and their relationships.

Every screenplay is a relationship screenplay. Yes, our characters are defined by their actions, but these actions usually happen within the context of their relationships. The way your character yearns, covets, loves, hates, suffers, kills, saves, changes and demonstrates change can be explained by their backstories and particular psychologies, but the audience can only *understand* and *experience* your character and his or her journey by the way he or she interacts with the other characters in your story. What are your characters' relationships at the beginning of the story? How do those relationships evolve as your story progresses? And finally what does that evolution say about your characters and their arcs (or lack of arcs) and the theme of the story?

For example: at the beginning of *When Harry Met Sally* Harry believes that men and women can't be friends and lovers at the same time; but in the final moments of the film, Harry finally comes to realize his love of Sally, runs through New York on New Years Eve to declare this love to his best friend. Thus, we see how the relationship, friends, distant friends even enemies, to lovers, mirrors the journey of the main character, Harry, and presents the theme of the movie. Men and women can indeed be friends and lovers.

The word relationship is defined this way: “The way in which two or more concepts, objects, or people are connected, or the state of being connected.” That connection doesn't have to be love. It can be friendship. It can be hatred. The

relationship can a familial one or one that develops between strangers. It can be the relationship (and its accompanying emotion jealousy, envy, loathing) between your protagonist and her antagonist. Whatever the relationship it must be defined early, we must understand it at the beginning of your story, in order to create audience hopes and fears associated with the relationship's development and its' resolution. Think of the relationship between Steve Martin's character and John Candy's character in *Trains, Planes and Automobile*: in the beginning the two are strangers who seemingly don't have a thing in common, they become begrudging travel mates, and then Steve Martin begins to dislike the annoying John Candy and John Candy pulls away, but in the final act, Steve Martin comes to understand the reason for Candy's neediness (Candy's backstory about his dead wife) and Candy's yearning for family touches Steven Martin's central want (to get home to his own family.) The two strangers become friends. *Margaret* Kenneth Lonergan's recent view of life and tragedy in New York has a different take on the stranger relationship as Anna Paquin's passing flirtation with Mark Ruffalo's bus driver turns into disdain as she eventually tries to destroy him.

Compare Puzzo/Coppola's *The Godfather* to Vinterberg's *The Celebration*, two films that couldn't be more different in their cinematic scope and in their views on family but both are riveting because of their attention to the characters and their relationships. In both films we have the son who needs to examine and change his relationship to his father in order to move on. Michael saves his father, moving from college boy to the new don, while the shy, reserved Christian destroys his father.

So, how will we do this? How will we achieve the course's stated goal of getting you to think about character and relationship? Obviously, story is central to creating characters and relationships, but by designing a class in which we ask you to put story aside while you explore and really go deep into character and relationship, we highlight this essential but often forgotten aspect of creating a captivating screenplay; hopefully creating compelling relationships will become central to all of your future efforts.

We will begin with characters. We will talk about relationships and the emotions that surround these relationships. We will talk about our own lives and how our relationships shape who we are and what we write. We will put our characters on our writer's psychiatrist's couch and explore their current and past relationships and how those relationships define them. I'm not talking only about mother and father and sister and brother, but best friend, greatest enemy, secret love, booty call, you name it. Then we will talk about your story and see if the character fits or if the relationships have altered what the story will be.

In this way we will be creating the story as if we were writing a play. Who are your characters and what are their interactions, their relationships? Later, we can discover all of the locations and plot complications. We will continually ask Jack Epps' question: "What is the play?" In other words what is the simple story that happens between the characters and how does this affect their relationships?

We will be writing **biographies**: creating histories for your characters, defining their motivations, hopes and fears. Questions such as: why will the audience be interested in this person? What is the reason exactly and when does that bonding moment with the audience happen? What is the need of your character (why is *this* story

happening to your character?) And what is their want? How do their relationships define them and fit into their want/need? Once the general questions have been answered we will write a three to five page **description of the story** from the point of view of the main character, first person. He or she will describe the movie we are about to write and it should mirror the way the relationships affect the story.

The second stage will be writing a **step outline or treatment**. We will review and add to what you know about structure but again we will keep the focus on the characters and their relationships. We will discuss the manner in which you tell the story. How is the character introduced? What is his/her defining scene? When is the tension clear? And what is the central question of the story? Then, what are the obstacles that frustrate your character in their journey? How do they find the courage to continue? Who is on their side and who is against them? What is their lowest point and what is their most brilliant moment in the story? Finally, how does your story resolve itself and what does that resolution have to say about your view of the world? In this part of the class we will work sequence by sequence, presenting **scenes that define the relationships** to the class. We will attempt to ‘see’ the movie in its entirety. At the end of this section of the class you will have written a 20-page **step outline or treatment** in which every scene in the movie is described.

Finally, you will write the first draft. First drafts should be written quickly and in a burst of enthusiasm and emotion. Use your outline to guide you, but let the story take you over. Let your characters speak and act. Since you have done so much character work, your characters should have their own voices. The real challenge in this step is to **finish the draft**. Once you have the first draft, you then have something you can make professional.

Your final portfolio of 305 will be: character and relationship exercises, ten pages of character biographies, a 3-5 page synopsis of your story, a 10-20 page treatment or step outline, and the first draft (90-120 pages) of your script.

The class is a seminar and you will be expected to read and give feedback to the material of your classmates. The collaborative process is central to writing for film and television and is an integral part of the 418a-b experience.

Course Goals:

1. Writers will learn the importance of relationships to writing feature scripts. The best movies are much more than plot; they are all about character.
2. Writers are encouraged to keep their stories unique and personal. To use their own lives and experiences. To strive to find their voice. To discover the stories they want to tell not the stories they think Hollywood wants them to tell.
3. Learn the techniques of creating character by writing biographies.
4. Learn to write a first person synopsis for your feature idea. This will focus your attention on the characters and their relationships.
5. Learn to write a treatment or step outline for a feature script. Story structure will be reviewed but not stressed. I want students to dare to let the relationships carry the story. I would prefer an ambitious character/ relationship driven failure to a possibly “working” but tired plot driven story.

6. Learn to write the first draft of a screenplay. You will review and learn to write exciting dialogue with unique character voices and to reveal character through the scene work. Note: the relationship screenplay is not only dialogue. Character is action.
7. Learn the techniques of analyzing a feature story by reacting to the work of our classmates. This is meant to mirror the professional collaborative process.

Assignments:

Week 1:

- Discuss class expectations, deadlines, and syllabus.
- Characters/relationship and possible story Ideas will be discussed. Main character? Audience? Genre?
- Students will be asked (in the first weeks) to pitch two possible main characters or exciting relationships. Why this movie? Why now?
- Homework: write a personal two page take (short story) on one of your relationships and the emotion it created
- Homework: prepare to talk about your second character/relationship or story idea.

Week 2:

- Discuss short stories.
- Discuss Second Story Idea.
- View clips of defining scenes and examples of relationships defined
- Homework: start to develop main character biographies.

Week 3:

- Discuss character biography work.
- Homework:
 - Decide on a story and write a one-page mission statement -- why this movie must be made.
 - Write and describe the two strongest relationships in your story
 - Homework: character biography work.

Week 4:

- Discuss mission statements.
- Discuss character work.
- Homework:
 - Begin work on secondary/ subplot characters.

Week 5:

- Discuss story and character work.
- Homework:
 - Write first person story synopsis.
 - Develop and deepen character work.

October 3rd – biographies and synopsis are due.

Week 6:

- Discuss final synopsis and final character biographies.

- Make a plan for the step outline.
- Screen a classic film first sequence, review character introductions, and scenes defining relationships, character routine, and point of attack.
- Homework: write character introduction, outline main character routine,
- Homework: write a defining scene for the movie's central relationship
- Homework: first sequence step outline is due.

Week 7:

- Discuss outlines, scenes and character introductions.
- Homework: write second sequence, leading to end of act one.
- Write a first person description of the main relationship of the film

Week 8:

- Discuss first act outlines, character's relationships.
- Homework: describe the tension of act two: hope vs. fear?
- Homework: describe obstacles to character's goal: internal or external?
- Homework: describe the changes to the central relationships
- Homework: write first sequence of second act outline.

Week 9:

- Discuss first sequence of second act outlines.
- Discuss obstacles and character's goals. Does the audience identify?
- Homework: write second sequence of act two.
- Describe the midpoint of your film. What is the big scene and how is it reflected in the character's relationships?
- Homework: write third and fourth sequences of act two.
- Describe the end of the second act. Is there a low point for your character? Is there a point of high tension in the central relationship? Describe it.

Week 10:

- Discuss the final sequences of act two.
- Homework: write outline for act three.
- Write a paragraph on the central relationship of your film and how it has changed. How has that change affected the main character?

October 24th – treatment or step outline is due.

Week 11:

- Discuss final outline.
- Homework: rewrite the 3-5 page first person account of the main character's journey in the story focusing on the character's relationships. Get his or her voice right. Have them describe what they go through and what it means to them.

Week 12:

- Read and discuss first person accounts.
- Remember the best stories are all about character!
- Homework: write the first 30 pages of your script. Email to the class.
- Homework: read and comment on classmates' first 30 pages.

Week 13:

- Discuss first 30 pages.
- Homework: write the next 30 pages of your script. Email to class.
- Homework: read and comment on classmates' first 30 pages.

Week 14:

- Discuss the next 30 pages.
- Homework: write the next 30 pages of your script. Email to class.
- Homework: read and comment on classmates' next 30 pages.

Week 15:

- Complete the first draft of your script
- Homework: make any revision requested by instructor.

December 9th – first draft of script is due.

Evaluation Criteria:

CTWR 305 grades will be based on careful consideration in the following areas of the students' work:

1. The ability to keep up with the writing required in the course's schedule.
2. Demonstrated understanding of the fundamental principles of a good *relationship* story: character, tension, and movement.
3. Demonstrated understanding of the fundamental principles of a good script: character, relationship, visualization, and scene, dialogue.
4. The ability to develop a synopsis, treatment and first draft of the script.
5. Class participation. The willingness to help classmates in their struggles with story, character, and structure. (The class is a seminar – participation is essential.)
6. Attendance. Absences are not allowed. More than one absence will result in a lower grade. Tardiness will not be tolerated.

Grading Weights:

CTWR 305 grades are based on:

Character Work	20%
Synopsis	15%
Treatment or Step	20%
First Draft of Script	35%
Class Participation	10%

Letter Grades:

91-100.... A	78-80.... B-	65-67...D+
88-90...A-	75-77.... C+	61-64...D
85-87...B+	71-74.... C	58-60...D-
81-84...B	68-70.... C	0-59...F

Classroom Decorum

The professor expects all students to respect and support the ideas and writing of their fellow students. Writing is a fragile process and while we should ask questions, analyze and even challenge, we want to remain supportive, always keeping in mind that the screenplay is fragile work in progress. A working writer needs to develop *the art of collaboration* while working with their peers. As a working writer you will need to be able to work constructively with directors, producers and studio executives.

Laptop and Texting Policy

Students may use their laptops at the discretion of the professor. Laptops may be used for note taking, but not for surfing the web unless it is part of a class project. Texting is not allowed during class time. Texting is distracting and disruptive. There is nothing that needs to be communicated to anyone except your classmates during class time.

Save your texting and surfing until class break.

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 <http://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/academicssupport/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.