UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS

WRITING DIVISION

**CTWR 533a**

Sections 19318D - Writing the Feature Script (2 units)

Fall 2016

Instructor: Rick Parks

Location: SCI 209

Time: 10 am - 12: 50 PM THURSDAYS

Office Hours: by appointment

Contact Info: rpparks@att.net

(818) 262-8091 (cell/text)

**533a Course Description:**

533a is a first draft feature class for grad production students who are writing a feature to fulfill their advanced requirement.

As directors or producers, writing, or knowledge of the craft can be your path to break into the industry, or, part of your job (and success) will depend on your ability to shepherd projects from mediocrity to excellence.

Toward that end, this class will guide the student through at least one of the many creative processes being used by successful screenwriters today.

We will begin with “ideation”, the time when a writer explores all the possibilities of his or her story (or stories.) During this time, character will be stressed. We will be writing biographies: creating histories for your characters, defining their motivations, hopes and fears.

We will focus on your characters' relatability - to both you and the audience.

We will be discussing a number of screenplay structures and their similar elements, giving you a ladder of choice to hang your story on.

We will be focusing on and encouraging your VOICE - finding it and nourishing it.

We will discuss marketability; assuring that your hero/heroine has bonded with your audience and is allowed to explore your thesis (premise) through your story.

We will work up a general premise and then develop additional, necessary characters, allowing these characters' wants and needs to dictate the necessary story, which will, at the **mid-term**, have evolved into...

A COMPLETED BEAT SHEET: a full (10-20 page) treatment in which every scene in the movie (sans dialogue) will be described.

From there you will begin your first draft.

The requirement is for you to finish this by the end of the semester.

As first drafts should be written quickly and in a burst of enthusiasm and emotion, you will use your outline to guide you, but allow the story the freedom to move where it must. Let your characters speak and act for themselves. The real challenge in this step is to finish the draft.

To PASS the course - the completed script (at least 100 pages) must be turned in no later than Monday of Finals Week and will count as the **final exam**.

Finally, the class is a seminar and you will be expected to read and give feedback on the material of your classmates. The collaborative process is central to writing for film and television and is an integral part of the 533a-b experience.

WARNING: 184 spec scripts were sold in 2013 -(it's getting better), but that's still out of *tens of thousands* being registered with the WGA.

If you don't put in the effort *here*, you'll die out there. I'm here to keep you alive to help you thrive. Help me help you.

**HOMEWORK AND NOTES**

Homework is due, via email, 48 hours before class, in order to give your classmates (and the professor) time to read/analyze your work, and to be prepared to give coherent, well thought out, and intelligent notes by Thursday’s class.

*Notes* on work are due (via email) 20 minutes before the class. They need not be extensive, but what I’m looking for is *critical faculty*.

Pretend you are a development executive and it’s your job to shepherd this project, and to present the draft to your boss.

While line notes are important, what I’m really looking for is your ability to tell if the deeper things in the script, such as plot, character, and theme are working.

While it’s natural to focus on what is *not* working, sometimes it can be more important to identify where writing is successful. A writer may be unaware of what is working, and by “do more of this” it helps establish a benchmark and direction to which the writer may aspire.

**Please send a single email with your notes for all students' work, rather than individual emails for each**, so that you are not clogging up my inbox.

# Classroom Decorum

The professor expects all students to respect and support the ideas and writing of their fellow students. Writing is a fragile evolving process and we can only expect success if we are supportive and positive in our feedback and criticisms of our fellow students. Any excessive negative attacks will reflect poorly on the student making the attacks and will affect their final grade. We are here to help each other become better writers. Rather than trying to tell a student what is wrong, this professor is more interested in revealing how to make it better. We should strive at all times for constructive criticism.

**Issues:**

If any issues or concerns arise with any member of the classroom, which might affect a supportive learning environment, the professor would highly encourage the student to contact him privately to seek a resolution.

**Individual Meetings:**

Students are encouraged to take advantage of office hours. Each student is expected to meet with the professor at least twice during the semester. **The professor will answer questions by email, but would rather answer them in depth during class,** so that the other students may benefit from discussing individual story/character/structure problems.

**PRESENTATION:**

As you are hoping to enter the film industry as professionals, I expect your work to be prepared in a professional manner. Screenplay formatting errors, typos, bad spelling or grammar and overall sloppiness are NOT ACCEPTABLE.

**Name every document:**

eg: YourName-Assignment Name. - Format

Like this: **Smith-Bob'sMagicalWorld pg1-10.fdx** , or: **SMITH-BMW1-10.fdx**

Also: Put your name, title and page number on the Header of EACH PAGE of your material.

**FINAL DRAFT:** As the professor (and his working peers) prefers Final Draft and the school provides it in at least a discounted or temporary format, he would prefer that *unless noted*, all assignments be completed in Final Draft format, so that both you and he can benefit from his NOTES on your work.

***Imperative reading:***

(In addition to a bazillion screenplays)

**Save The Cat** by Blake Snyder - Michael Wiese Productions, try AMAZON

**The Writer's Journey** by Christopher Vogler 3rd ed. Michael Wiese Productions

**The Tools of Screenwriting** by David Howard and Edward Mabley

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

Oscar-Winning Screenwriters on Screenwriting by Joel Engel, Hyperion, New York 2002

Conversations with Wilder by Cameron Crowe, Random House, New York 1999

**Grading Criteria:**

In-class and homework exercises: 30%

Mid-term Beat Sheet 40%

Final script 20%

Class participation: 10%

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

As per Writing Division policy the following is a breakdown of numeric 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%

**SCREWING UP:**

As the standards for the USC School of Cinematic arts are higher than other institutions, grading will be dependent on depth and breadth of thought in assignment preparation as well as serious and constructive class participation. All assignments must be submitted on time. "A"'s are for outstanding work. There may be **only one A grade** in this class, make it yours.

In GENERAL:

-If you show up to class, and do the minimum required work, you will get a C.

-If you show up to class, and demonstrate a significant effort, you will get a B.

-If you show up to class, demonstrate a significant effort and do exceptional work, you will then get an A.

The professor expects students to conduct themselves in a **professional** manner as they prepare to work in The Industry. Professional means all work delivered on time, neat, printed, well thought out. Hurried or slip shod work will not be appreciated. Effort is of critical importance in determining final grade.

If you shine, I will notice. If you fall back, I will also notice. Everyone succeeds in my class.

**Punctuality!**

LATE ASSIGNMENTS WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.

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

You will be allowed **one,** unexcused tardiness. After that, you will have your grade lowered by one-third letter grade for each occurrence. BE ON TIME. IT IS HIGHLY INCONSIDERATE TO YOUR PEERS IF YOU ARE NOT.

**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 (A-).

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 or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

**SICK POLICY**

If you are sick and contagious, please do not come to class. If you are unsure whether you are contagious, contact the USC Health Center. Any genuine illness will be accommodated for, and I will make up that class with the student either over the phone, skype, or in person at another time. I would much rather spend an extra couple of hours with a student when they are well, than to lose several days of creative time to illness, and I’m sure most of your fellow classmates will feel the same way.

**Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:**

Students may bring laptops to class to take notes and review work. However, internet usage during class is allowed only for class discussion. Cellphone use is not allowed, except before and after class and during breaks.

**Class Schedule:**

SCHEDULE:

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Date | Week | Teaching: |
| 8/25 | Wk 1 | **Introduction. Ideation. One of the paradigms. Want, need, fear. early character study – Lajos Egri, Snyder.**  Assignment: Prose character/confrontation essay (3pgs+/-)  Catalytic confrontation.  Assignment: be prepared to discuss your film idea from on or more of these elements: FRAME - Setting, location, situation.  CHARACTER(s) -  perhaps wants, needs, fears.  PREMISE -  eg., “a man cannot live life without affecting people”, or  “two friends cannot fall in love and remain friends” or “desperate situations bring out the worst in people”.  GENRE - either the usual conventions or your own version of the same. |
| 9/1 | Wk 2 | **VOGLER Joseph Campbell’s “The Hero’s Journey”, and the Four Basic Character Arcs. Archetypes, genres, commerciality.**  Assignment: Analyze 1-2 films, using one of the paradigms presented. Try to find the exact moments of structure.  Assignment: Prose assignment to write the catalytic confrontation scene from the antagonist's POV. (3pgs +/-) |
| 9/8 | Wk 3 | **Theme, Protagonists, Modifiers, Opponents. Thematic Subplots.**  Assignment: Three different protagonists for your film.  Assignment: Three different genres.  Assignment: prepare a pitch of your idea |
| 9/15 | Wk 4 | **CARDS - Acts, Sequences, Scenes, and Beats.**  Within and without the cards themselves  Assignment: card your first act. **SET UP**  Assignment: Choose one of your three ideas as the project you will write for the semester. Break this idea down by acts and 30 page chunks. |
| 9/22 | Wk 5 | **Tracking the hero - tracking the engine - following the B story**  Assignment: Find 3 great introductions to characters. |
| 9/29 | Wk 6 | **Breaking the second act: New Rules of the Game, Midpoints, Making Plot Serve Character.**  Assignment: Flesh out the second act for your treatment with the emphasis of further making plot serve character.  Assignment: Write the first page |
| 10/06 | Wk 7 | **PAGE ONE! Breaking the third act: The Inmost Cave, The Supreme Ordeal, The Tag**  Assignment: Flesh out the third act for your treatment, with the emphasis of making your characters *earn* their change.  Assignment: Bring in several different pages with different styles of screenwriting to class.  Assignment: Page One, AGAIN |
| 10/13 | Wk 8 | **Catchup Class, Additional development of problem areas. Scene Design: Objectives, Strategies, Obstacles, Reversals, etc. First Pages. Etc.**  Assignment: Bring 3 great first pages into class, one of which you’ve written. |
| 10/20 | Wk 9 | **Basics of Style, Writing a Great First Page. The TWIST**  Assignment: CARDS MUST BE FINISHED - prepare to spread them out in class. |
| 10/27 | Wk 10 | **Pages 1-10, Advanced Style and Page Design - class notes More cards**  Assignment: the next sequence |
| 11/3 | Wk 11 | **Pages 11-25**, **Finding Your Voice/ Brevity/Haiku**  Assignment: Pages 37-50 focus on finding your voice. |
| 11/10 | Wk 12 | **MORE Pages Midpoints, and Tracking the Half Way Mark**  Assignment: Re-write some of your previous pages to share them with the class. |
| 11/17 | Wk 13 | **More pages Crafting Dialogue**  Assignment: Apply dialogue lessons to writing.  Assignment: Pages 62-75 |
| 11/24 | Wk 14 | **Write more! - \*\*\* THANKSGIVING \*\*\***  pages due as usual - send them and be prepared for notes over pie. |
| 12/1 | Wk 15 | **More Pages Correlatives/Hailbacks/Payoffs**  **You should be done by now...** |
| 12/9 | Wk 16 | **Pages, Rewriting is Writing / recap of what we’ve learned. Tying it together. Bonus Lecture: Complex Structure - Pulp Fiction, Finding Nemo, & House of Sand and Fog**  Assignment: Write rewrite proposal – what you’ll change in your next class, or over break.  Assignment: To rewrite 2-5 pages a day, every day, over break. |

Please note that all dates are subject to change at the discretion of the professor.

**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](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](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](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](http://sarc.usc.edu/) describes reporting options and other resources.

**Support Systems**

A number of USCs 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](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:**

**FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX**