UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS

WRITING DIVISION

**CTWR 415a**

Sections 19436 - Writing the Feature Script (2 units)

Spring 2017

Instructor: Rick Parks

Location: SCB 304

Time: 7:00 to 10:00 PM WEDNESDAYS

Office Hours: by appointment

Contact Info: rpparks@att.net

(818) 262-8091 (cell/text)

**415a Course Description:**

Principles of the feature film -- creating theme, character and structure; elements which make up part of a feature-length story treatment

The objective of this course is to learn a professional approach to screenwriting from conception of the idea through the outlining process, to develop good writing habits while discovering one's creative voice. The focus will be on learning how to break a story, develop an idea, create character arcs, and craft an idea into a "three act" structure and to begin the first 15 screenplay pages.

GOALS:

• Learn to identify a feature-worthy story

• Create a dimensional, compelling and unique protagonist and catalyst

• Understand breaking story

• Understand basic dramatic structure

• Orally present your concepts in a clear and dynamic manner

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, as a FINAL, have evolved into...

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

Finally, the class is a seminar and you will be expected to read and give feedback on the material of your classmates

**HOMEWORK AND NOTES**

Homework is due, via **email**, 24/48 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.

# 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 the professor's availability. **The professor will answer questions by email, skype or face time, but would rather answer them in depth during class,** so that the other students may benefit from discussing individual story/character/structure problems.

**PRESENTATION:**

Formatting errors, typos, bad spelling, grammar and overall sloppiness are NOT ACCEPTABLE.

**Name every document:**

eg: YourName-AssignmentName.doxx Or: **Smith-Bob'sWorld pg1-10.fdx** , or: **SMITH-BW1-10.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 if and when you are writing any scene work, 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

**Grading Criteria:**

Participation: 10% (including attendance)

Feedback to classmates: 10%

Homework/written Assignments: 50% (see below)

Final Outline: 30%

-----------------------------------

Obvious total: 100%

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

**ASSIGNMENT BREAKDOWN: out of 80% of your grade**

prose confrontation - 1%

film ideas - 1.25%

film analysis - 1.25%

prose confrontation 2 - 1.25%

3 protagonists - 1.25%

3 genres - 1%

pitch - 1.5%

hero bio - 1.5%

choose project - 1%

antagonist /catalyst - 1.25%

1st cards - 1.25%

3 character introductions - 1.25%

**2nd cards - 7.5%**

first page comments - .25%

**3rd cards - 7.5%**

styles of writing - 1.25%

3 first pages - 1.25%

**4th cards - 7.5%**

rewrite of page one - 1.25%

**5th cards - 7.5%**

Cards revised

Cards revised

Dialogue lessons - 1.25%

**Final cards / outline - 30%**

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!**

UNEXCUSED, LATE ASSIGNMENTS WILL BE DOCKED 50%.

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.

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.

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:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Date | Week | Teaching: |
| 01/11 | Wk 1 | **Introduction. Ideation. One of the paradigms. Want, need, fear. early character study – Vogler/ Egri /Snyder.**  Assignment: Prose character/confrontation essay (3pgs+/-)  Catalytic (pivotal moment) confrontation.  Assignment: be prepared to discuss your film ideas, from one 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. |
| 01/18 | 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 +/-) |
| 01/25 | 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 |
| 02/01 | Wk 4 | **CHARACTER: the list and what else is there?**  Assignment: Write a HERO character bio - not just descriptives, but thoughts  Assignment: Choose one of your three ideas as the project you will work on for the semester. |
| 02/08 | Wk 5 | **CHARACTER: the antagonist/catalyst - the same**  Assignment: Why this person? Or Element? Write out your antagonist's purpose in your story and define why they're perfect. |
| 02/15 | Wk 6 | **CARDS - Acts, Sequences, Scenes, and Beats.**  Within and without the cards themselves  Assignment: card what you know |
| 02/22 | Wk 7 | **Tracking the hero - tracking the engine - following the B story**  Assignment: Find 3 great introductions to characters from 3 different scripts. |
| 03/01 | Wk 8 | **Breaking the second act: New Rules of the Game, Midpoints, Making Plot Serve Character.**  Assignment: Flesh out the cards of the first act.  Assignment: Read and comment on first pages hand-out |
| 03/08 | Wk 9 | **CARDING - Breaking the third act: The Inmost Cave, The Supreme Ordeal, The Tag/ Writing a Great First Page.**  Assignment: First part of second act  Assignment: Bring in several different pages with different styles of screenwriting to class.  Assignment: Bring 3 great first pages into class, one of which you’ve written. |
| SPRING BREAK |  |  |
| 03/22 | Wk 11 | **Additional development of problem areas. Scene Design: Objectives, Strategies, Obstacles, Reversals, etc. First Pages. Etc.**  Assignment: card Second part of second act  Assignment: Re-write page one |
| 03/29 | Wk 12 | **Basics of Style, The TWIST/ Correlatives/Hailbacks/Payoffs**  Assignment: Third act cards, with the emphasis of making your characters *earn* their change. |
| 04/05 | Wk 13 | **GROUP A - class notes More cards**  Assignment: TBD |
| 04/12 | Wk 14 | **GROUP B - same**  Assignment: TBD. |
| 04/19 | Wk 15 | **Crafting Dialogue**  Assignment: Apply dialogue lessons to writing. |
| 04/26 | Wk 16 | **FINAL CLASS**  **Final notes and discussions / recap of what we’ve learned. Tying it together.** |

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/>.  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>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**