

CTWR 533A (19333D) – WRITING THE FEATURE SCRIPT

COURSE SYLLABUS

CLASS: CTWR 533A – WRITING THE FEATURE SCRIPT

PREREQ's: CTWR 529, also recommended CTWR 516

TIME/LOC.: Thursdays from 10am-12:50pm

INSTRUCTOR: Peter Gamble Robinson

OFFICE HOURS: After class, or by appointment.

PHONE: 213-925-8880 (Between 9:00am and 9pm)

EMAIL: PeterGamble@att.net

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSES

Writing a feature screenplay is difficult even for those who have dedicated their lives to it. According to one statistic, only 77 screenplay specs were purchased in 2005, when over 30,000 were registered at the WGA during the same period. Even among the movies which were released in theaters, (and which we might assume are the best of the best) there are numerous examples of awful screenwriting. As directors, writing can be your path to break into the industry, or, as a director, part of your job (and success) will depend on your ability to shepherd projects from mediocrity to excellence.

Which brings us to this class.

We have 16 short weeks to learn more than 30,000 of your colleagues. The requirements of the class dictate that you finish a feature screenplay by the end of the semester. The first half of the semester will focus exclusively on story-breaking with an emphasis on story structure, and its elements: plot, character, and theme. The second half of the semester will focus on the actual writing of a screenplay, producing 10-15 pages a week, emphasizing scene structure, style, dialogue, and page design.

Our goals will be as follows:

- 1) To learn story structure with a thesis that a well crafted script comes from the synergy of plot, character, and theme. The goal will be for you to have the skills necessary to break any story in your future work, not just the specific idea we're working on in class.
- 2) To help you find your own voice. Part of your success as a writer will not be your emulation of another person's voice, but rather, the unique ability that comes from your own individual voice. People will hire you because of what you, and only you can do. We will emphasize making your writing as original as possible.

3) To create a product that will assist with your professional career when you leave school.

HOMEWORK AND NOTES

Homework is due via email 48 hours before class, in order to give your classmates (and teacher) time to read your work, and be prepared and educated enough to give coherent, well thought out, and intelligent notes by class.

Notes are due via email by the start of 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 will have 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, rather than individual emails for each, so that you are not clogging up our inboxes. Your assignments should be in .PDF format, and should have your last name at the beginning of the file name. You may make your notes inside the PDF that you are given.

All assignments should be written in final draft, or another screenwriting software that allows for revisions in red, and with *'s at the edge of the page. This is a standard of the industry, and (if you're not already) now is a good a time to become acclimated to it. **Each week the new revisions should be marked with asterisks, and the work from the previous week should no longer be marked**, in this way we can focus only on the most recent changes you have made Please see me with any questions or problems with this.

GRADING AND ABSENCES

The work done through the semester will be applied towards your final grade as follows:

10% participation
15% outline
50% first draft
15% polish
10% written critical analysis of classmates' work.

Your written critiques of your classmates work each week are not participation.

Participation is the grade you get for spirited discourse inside the class. Your written analysis is a separate grade given for your ability to analyze your colleague's work, and

to show understanding of the skills we are teaching in the class. This is important because much of the available work to a screenwriter is "rewrite work" where you have to see the flaws in another persons writing, and be able to not only understand how to fix it, but also be able to convey this convincingly to a producer in order to get the job.

As per 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%

In general, you should assume the following general guidelines as a way of thinking about what type of grade you will receive:

- 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 get an A.
- If you do not show up to class, don't complete your assignments, or fail to complete your assignments in a timely manner, you will get a D or an F.

Your performance in class, and your notes will (each) be worth half a letter grade. Two or more unexcused absences or late assignments will lower your grade a half letter grade. Absences can be excused in advance with permission. Unexcused late assignments will receive an automatic F.

Additional notes on how to get an A: From previous experience, people who get A's apply the notes they are given in class, integrating them into their work each week. They do the work each week not because it was assigned, but because they aspire already to be professional writers. As such, they go beyond the bare minimum of each assignment.

SICK POLICY

If you are sick and still 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 lose several days of creative time to illness, and I'm sure most of your fellow classmates will feel the same way.

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.

SCHEDULE:

Date Week Teaching:

8/24 Wk 1 **INTRO, GOAL SETTING**

Lecture(s):

- 1) Synergy Theory
- 2) Character establishment & arcs

Assignment(s):

- 1) Write your single sentence/paragraph.
- 2) Character Arc Exercise

8/31 Wk 2 **CHARACTER & ARC OUTLINE**

Discussion: Homework.

Lecture: Acts, Plot Points & Chapters

Assignment(s):

- 1) Revise your assignment, using revisions mode, adding chapters and acts

9/7 Wk 3 **ACTS & CHAPTER OUTLINE**

Discussion: Homework.

Lecture: Theme, Modifiers & Third Acts

Assignment:

1) Revise chapter outlines.

- | | | |
|-------|-------|--|
| 9/14 | Wk 4 | CHAPTER OUTLINE & THEME
Discussion: Homework.
Lecture(s): How to do a scene outline.
Assignment: Do first 1/2 of the scene outline. |
| 9/21 | Wk 5 | SCENE OUTLINE (First Half)
Discussion: Pages 1-15, and how well characters are defined.
Lecture(s): None. Focus on outlines.
Assignment: Do second 1/2 of outline. |
| 9/28 | Wk 6 | SCENE OUTLINES (Second half)
Discussion: Homework
Lecture: Character establishment
Assignment: Pages 1-15 |
| 10/5 | Wk 7 | PAGES 1-15, CHARACTER ESTABLISHMENT
Discussion: Pages 1-15
Lecture: Scene Structure
Assignment: Pages 15-30 |
| 10/12 | Wk 8 | PAGES 15-30 SCENE STRUCTURE
Discussion: Pages 15-30, focus on character arc.
Lecture: Dialogue
Assignment: Pages 30-45 |
| 10/19 | Wk 9 | PAGES 30-45, DIALOGUE
Discussion: Pages 30-45
Lecture: Voice & Style
Assignment: Pages 45-60 |
| 10/26 | Wk 10 | PAGES 45-60, VOICE AND STYLE
Discussion: Pages 45-60
Lecture: Hero's Journey
Assignment: Pages 60-75 |
| 11/2 | Wk 11 | PAGES 60-75, HERO'S JOURNEY
Discussion: Pages 60-75
Lecture: Trimming & Editing
Assignment: Pages 75-90 |
| 11/9 | Wk 12 | PAGES 75-90, THE TRIM |

Discussion: Pages 75-90
Lecture: Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind
Assignment: Pages 90-105

11/16 Wk 13 **PAGES 90-105, HARE BRAIN TORTOISE MIND**

Discussion: Pages 90-105
Lecture: Modifiers
Assignment: Pages 105-120

11/23 **THANKSGIVING BREAK**

Discussion: Pages 1-60, focus on Dialogue.
Lecture: How to punch up dialogue.
Assignment: Rewrite pages 1-60, focus on one character only, and work on their dialogue, focusing on creating a more refined character, and voice.

11/30 Wk 14 **PAGES 105-120, MODIFIERS**

Discussion: Pages 60-120, focus on Dialogue
Sendoff Lecture: The business of screenwriting.

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/departments/departments-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.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.

<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>
--