

USC School of Cinematic Arts

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCREENPLAY

CTWR 523

SECTION 19378D

Spring Semester 2018

Mondays, 1:00 – 3:50pm

SCA 362

Professor Robert Townsend, Instructor

Email: robertto@usc.edu

Phone/Text: 818-731-3518

Office hours by appointment only

CALENDAR/SESSION DATES

First day of classes:

Monday, January 8, 2018

Last day to add:

Friday, January 26, 2018

Last day to drop without a mark of “W” and receive a refund:

Friday, January 26, 2018

End of session:

Wednesday, May 9, 2018

SPRING SEMESTER

CLASS BEGINS	Mon	January 8
MARTIN LUTHER KING’S BIRTHDAY	Mon	January 15
PRESIDENTS’ DAY	Mon	February 19
SPRING RECESS	Sun-Sun	March 11-18
CLASSES END	Fri	April 27

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Each student in the course must complete a first draft of the screenplay by the end of the semester. The Screenplay must have a strong central character, a working three-act structure and a tractable character arc. Although graduate level students will have already been trained in the fundamentals of screenwriting, the fundamentals of screenwriting will be stressed, reviewed and each screenplay will be based on a solid, dramatic foundation.

Good stories revolve around **character**. This course will devote a large portion of time to making sure each student develops distinctive, thoughtful characters. Attention will be paid to the creation of short character biographies and character sketches to help establish clear character motivations. The fundamentals of developing good characters -- such as having a clear understanding of each character's motivations, goals, dreams, ambitions, and deficiencies -- will be reviewed weekly. The main character needs to be challenged to grow and change by the conclusion of the screenplay. Attention will be given to charting consistent character arcs.

Each character must have a distinctive voice that differentiates them from the other characters in the screenplay. Distinctive dialogue is the product of clearly delineated characters. By setting up proper character dynamics and creating strong conflicts between multiple characters, the writer will have a broader set of tools to work with in successfully completing a screenplay. Gathering of proper story elements will be the focus of the few weeks of the course.

Oscar-winning Screenwriter William Goldman states that a writer must always protect the spine of the narrative. One of the goals of the course will be to help each student develop a strong narrative structure that will allow their characters to travel down a clear, well-charted path to a satisfying conclusion. This course will emphasize the benefits of a 3-act design.

The course will stress character over plot, since emphasis on plot can become a **trap** for the beginning screenwriter. Stories are about people, and a screenwriter must be able to paint three-dimensional characters in realistic relationships. Emphasis will be placed on understanding the interrelationship between narrative and character, since they work together hand-in-hand.

Because of the short duration of the semester, the course will approach assignments and deadlines in a professional manner. Treatments, outlines, scenes, and act conclusions are expected to be completed by deadlines. Part of learning to be a professional screenwriter is to write under pressure and produce under a deadline. All assignments must be completed on time. This instructor will encourage students to write through difficult spots with the belief that getting to "The End" of a first draft is more important than polishing

along the way. The course will seek to inspire creative ways to help the students move through inevitable episodes of writer's block.

REQUIRED READING:

Gardner's Guide to Screenplay From Idea to Successful Script by Jule Selbo-Garth Gardner Company, Washington DC 2007

Godfather – Screenplay by Mario Puzo, Francis Ford Coppola, Robert Towne

Philomena – Screenplay by Steve Coogan, Jeff Pope

The Apartment – Screenplay by Billy Wilder, I. A. L. Diamond

SUGGESTED READING:

Screenwriting is Rewriting: The Art and Craft of Professional Revision by Jack Epps

Save The Cat by Blake Snyder – Michael Wiese Productions, Studio City, CA

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

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

Die Hard – Screenplay by Steven E. de Souza, Jeb Stuart

SUBJECT MATTER OF THE COURSE:

- The Original Idea
- Creating Characters
- Emotionally Tracking Characters
- Dramatic Structure
- Three act design
- Sub-plot
- Conflict
- Complication
- Theme
- Dialogue
- Set-ups and Payoff

TOPIC AND METHODOLOGY:

The Course is designed to use group discussion and critique, review of film and screenplays, individual readings of student's work, class discussion and critique. The class structure will include an intensive review of screenplays and films that help best exemplify the material the professor wants covered in the class.

Students will be expected to participate in all discussions and to help their fellow students develop their outlines and screenplays. In the Industry, writers are often called upon to work on their feet and this classroom will be used as a training ground to hone this important skill.

GRADING CRITERIA:

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. **The professor feels strongly about prompt attendance at all classes and conferences.** Students who cannot make a class must contact the professor by email or through the front office **before** they miss the class. It is the student's responsibility to communicate with the professor in a timely manner. 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.

Areas that will be considered in determining course final grade are:

- Assignment #1: Two Ideas – 5%
- Assignment #2: Character Assignment – 10%
- Assignment #3: Presentation – 10%
- Assignment #4: The Setup and Conflict – aka Beat sheet – 10%
- Assignment #5: Beat-sheet Revision – 10%
- Assignment #6: Sequence 1 – 5%
- Assignment #7: Sequence 2 & 3 – 10%
- Assignment #8: Sequence 4 – 5%
- Assignment #9: Sequence 5 – 5%
- Assignment #10: Sequence 6 – 5%
- Assignment #11: Sequence 7 – 5%
- Assignment #12: Sequence 8 – 5%
- Assignment #13: Revision – 5%
- Critique and Discussion Participation – 10%

This course is demanding and success depends on a student's commitment to hard work and originality. Working as a professional writer involves collaboration and this professor expects the students to be involved in each and every discussion. Lack of involvement or lack of working on other student's ideas may adversely affect the student's grade.

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 limited questions by email, but would rather answer questions in depth during class time or during office hours.** The professor encourages his students to bring their questions to class so that the other students may benefit from discussing individual story problems.

CLASSROOM DECORUM:

The professor expects all students to respect and support the ideas and writings 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 students 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 telling them how to make it better. We should strive at all times for constructive criticism.

CLASS SCHEDULE:

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

LAPTOP POLICY AND TEXTING POLICY:

Laptops can only be used in the class solely for note taking. Instant messaging, tweeting, texting, checking email or surfing the web is distracting to the professor and your fellow students. You should be able to survive two hours and fifty minutes without checking your email or tweeting some random thought. Texting should be saved for break time. If laptops are used other than note taking, the professor reserves the right to ban laptops from the classroom.

INTERNET POLICY:

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the internet.

WRITING DIVISION ATTENDANCE POLICY:

Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Two unexcused absences will result in your grade being lowered by 5%. Your grade will be lowered by 5% for every absence after. Two late arrivals equate 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.

EXPECTATION OF PROFESSIONALISM:

All material is expected to be turned in on time and in the proper format. Assignments will be penalized for grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, format mistakes, and typos. Please use Final Draft or Movie Magic screenwriting software for your script. Stay away from the Celtix screenwriting software it tends to cause lots of problems.

Please proof your assignment prior to submission.

COURSE SCHEDULE AND SYLLABUS:

(Subject to change as needed)

WEEK 1. January 8

INTRODUCTIONS:

- Discuss: Recap from previous writing classes
- Talk about great screenplays
- Discuss “Know the World”
- What is the story about?

ASSIGNMENT #1: Work two ideas as stories. Take a run at them without concern where they end up. Look for conflict and potential story lines.

Read Screenplay Chapter One: “So you want to write a screenplay” and Chapter Two: “Where Ideas Come From?” pages 3-21

WEEK 2. January 15

NO CLASS: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. - NATIONAL HOLIDAY

WEEK 3. January 22

Discuss:

- Whose story is it?
- Who is the character?
- What do they want?
- Why is it important to the plot and the audience?
- Examine internal and external character story

Determine the main character’s wants and needs.

Develop the “force” that is propelling out main character through their story.

What is the main character trying to say?

TURN IN ASSIGNMENT #2 Discover the Defining Event –

Write a newspaper article about an important event in their main Characters’ lives, as if it just happened. Interview your main characters and quote them in their stories. ***Email a copy to all members of the class by Sunday night at midnight and be prepared to present it in class.***

Read Screenplay Chapter Five: “Character is Everything,” pages 53-93, Chapter Seven: “Build your Characters Normal Life,” pages 87-93.

WEEK 4. January 29

Discuss:

- Sequencing the screenplay into event/theme/character scene groupings
- Structure as relations to both plot and character

TURN IN ASSIGNMENT #3: Write out your verbal presentation include themes that run through your story such as redemption, honor, regret, healing, self-discovery, etc. ***Email a copy to all members of the class by Sunday night at midnight and be prepared to present it in class.***

Prepare to tell the class your story as a verbal presentation. This is not a pitch, but a discussion of your idea. Look for threads to hold it together and run throughout the story. Look for plot and character story lines.

Read Screenplay Chapter Three: "Three Act Structure," and "Beyond and Four: Eleven Step Story Structure," pages: 21-53.

EACH STUDENT MUST MAKE AN APPOINTMENT TO DISCUSS THEIR SCREENPLAY IDEA WITH ME AT SOME POINT IN THE SEMESTER.

WEEK 5. February 5

Discuss:

- The set-up and develop into the main body of the story
- How the set-up will be resolved in the third act

TURN IN ASSIGNMENT #4: Work on your in class story presentation. Tell the story scene by scene. Each scene should have a "scene point" (what the scene is about) and an "action description" (what happens in the scene).

Begin to develop the story into 8 major sequences. Each sequence must have a question. Identify the three-act structure, the first and second culmination. ***Email a copy to all members of the class by Sunday night at midnight and be prepared to present it in class.***

Read Screenplay Chapter Fifteen: "Logline, Synopsis, Outline, and Treatment," and Chapter Sixteen: "Dramatic Question, Theme, Point of View," pages: 189-211.

WEEK 6. February 12

Discuss:

- In class presentation of story outlines
- Discuss Revisions.

The beats sheets will be continually revised during the semester and it is acceptable if the beat sheet and the end of the semester is considerably different than the one delivered early in the term. Constant revision is an important part of writing.

TURN IN ASSIGNMENT #5: Using your in class notes, revise your beat-sheet. ***Email a copy to all members of the class by Sunday night at midnight and be prepared to present it in class.***

Read Screenplay Chapter Ten: "Beats, Scenes, and Sequences" and Eleven: "Exposition," pages 123-151.

WEEK 7. **February 19**
NO CLASS – PRESIDENTS' DAY

WEEK 8. **February 26**

Discuss:

- Finish story presentations
- Read and discuss pages looking to clarifying and simplifying the character story and plot problems

TURN IN ASSIGNMENT #6: Deliver 15 pages (the first sequence) focusing on establishing character problem, and on establishing the world of the story. ***Email a copy to all members of the class by Sunday night at midnight and be prepared to present it in class.***

Read Screenplay Chapter Twelve: Dialogue," pages: 151-165 and Chapter Seventeen: "Start Writing: Act One," pages: 211-216.

WEEK 9. **March 5**

Discuss:

- The First Act

TURN IN ASSIGNMENT #7: Deliver pages 15 to 45 (the second and third sequence). ***Email a copy to all members of the class by Sunday night at midnight and be prepared to present it in class.***

Read Screenplay Chapter Eight: "Plot," pages: 95-111, Chapter Thirteen: "Action," and Fourteen: "Events," pages: 151-189. Chapter Six: "Endings First," pages: 79-87, and Chapter Nine: "Subplots A, B, and C Stories, and Runners" from pages: 111-123.

SPRING RECESS March 11-18

WEEK 10. March 19

Discuss:

- Read Pages 30 to 45 (the third sequence)
- Follow the initial story problem and character problem
- The various relationships that are being examined
- Sub-plot
- How can the various relationships help to propel us through the second act?

TURN IN ASSIGNMENT #8: Pages 45 -60. *Email a copy to all members of the class by Sunday night at midnight and be prepared to present it in class.*

Read Screenplay Chapter Eighteen: "Working on Act Two," pages: 216- 230.

WEEK 11. March 26

Discuss:

- Read and discuss pages 45-60 (the fourth sequence)
- First half of Act Two and continue to discuss ways to develop more sub-plot and complication
- The mid-point plot turn

TURN IN ASSIGNMENT #9: Pages 60-75. *Email a copy to all members of the class by Sunday night at midnight and be prepared to present it in class.*

Read Screenplay Chapter Nineteen: "Working on Act Three," pages: 230- 238.

WEEK 12. April 2

Discuss

- The importance of changes in plot in characters as we turn to the back half of the screenplay
- Read and discuss pages 60-75 (the fifth sequence)

TURN IN ASSIGNMENT #10: Pages 75-90. *Email a copy to all members of the class by Sunday night at midnight and be prepared to present it in class.*

Read Screenplay Chapter Twenty: "Checklists," pages 239-246.

WEEK 13. April 9

Discuss:

- Focus on looking to increase complications through intensifying relationships and subplot.
- Complete the Second Act, sixth sequence
- Read and discuss pages 75-90 (the sixth sequence).

TURN IN ASSIGNMENT #11: Pages 90-105. ***Email a copy to all members of the class by Sunday night at midnight and be prepared to present it in class.***

Read Screenplay Chapter Twenty-One: *"The Business of Being a Screenwriter,"* pages 249-261.

WEEK 14 April 16

Discuss:

- The Third Act as it relates to both resolving the character story and resolving the main plot problem.
- Read and discuss pages 90-106 (the seventh sequence).

TURN IN ASSIGNMENT #12: Pages 105-120. ***Email a copy to all members of the class by Sunday night at midnight and be prepared to present it in class.***

Week 15 April 23

Discuss:

- Read and discuss pages 105-120 (the eight sequence).

ASSIGNMENT #13: Students will take notes and execute a short revision of their screenplay paying attention to character development, motivation, and consistency,

CLASS ENDS April 27

FINALS WEEK May 2-9

Deliver complete First Draft for Final Exam. The class will extend into exam week and discuss completed drafts.

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 Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” <https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/>. 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>.

Support Systems:

Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

<https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>

Sexual Assault Resource Center

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: <http://sarc.usc.edu/>

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://equity.usc.edu/>

Bias Assessment Response and Support

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>

The Office of Disability Services and Programs

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. <http://dsp.usc.edu>

Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>

Diversity at USC

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. <https://diversity.usc.edu/>

USC Emergency Information

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, <http://emergency.usc.edu>

USC Department of Public Safety – 213-740-4321 (UPC) and 323-442-1000 (HSC) for 24-hour emergency assistance or to report a crime.

Provides overall safety to USC community. <http://dps.usc.edu>

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