UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS

The John Wells Division of

Writing for Screen and Television

CTWR 413: **Writing the Short Script**

Two Units, Required for Production Students

(#19179D)

Instructor: Rick Parks

Location: SCB 101

Time: 10-12:50pm WEDNESDAYS

Hours: by appointment

Contact: rpparks@att.net

 (818) 262-8091 (cell/text)

To be taken concurrently with CTPR 241, 242 & 290, in preparation for CTPR 310.

**GOALS OF THIS COURSE**:

• Introduction to the craft of screenwriting.

• To learn and practice the elements of a “Good story well told.”

• To strengthen & deepen your ability to conceive compelling ideas, characters and stories through experience and observation

• To learn to write from a visual and aural perspective.

• To learn narrative structure

• To learn the building blocks of the dramatic scene.

• To write a short script screenplay

This is an introductory course in writing for the screen in which you will learn and develop your craft as a storyteller. You will learn to draw on your memories, experiences, observation and of course imagination to create compelling characters and stories for the screen.

This is a workshop class. Together we will read and critique a series of weekly assignments, both in and outside the class, designed to help you understand the fundamentals of screenwriting. You will learn to bring your visual and aural senses to your writing, to see and hear your film as you write it, developing and exploring your characters through situations of conflict.

WORKSHOP FOCUS:

• CHARACTER WORK: To strengthen & deepen your ability to conceive characters and ideas that will lead to compelling stories.

• IDEATION: To facilitate the development of artistic technique and cinematic imagination.

• OBSERVATION: To develop ideas for stories and characters through observation of, research into, and direct experience with and from real life.

• PERCEPTION: To learn to write from a visual and aural perspective.

• TECHNIQUE: To understand the structure and economy of effective narrative screenwriting.

• CRAFT: To develop a fundamental understanding of the dramatic scene.

• VOICE: To explore and develop your artistic point of view and original cinematic voice.

• COHESION: To learn to write the short script. (CTPR 310)

• DISCIPLINE: To understand the importance of rewriting.

Screenwriting format is not an exact science; within accepted parameters, you should develop a format style that you find both comfortable and expressive. To this end you will read as many professional (recent) screenplays as possible, reporting to the class on at least one of them.

I recommend using **Final Draft**. If you don’t own the software, you can download a free demo version—with watermark—from the Final Draft website (<http://www.finaldraft.com/downloads/demo-final-draft.php>). You may use this demo version to do all your assignments.

Course Reading:

Select screenplays (**required**, provided by instructor)

In addition, suggested readings for this class are:

1. *The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writer’s Guide to the Craft and Elements of a Screenplay,* by David Howard & Edward Mabley
2. Creative Filmmaking From the Inside Out, Dannenbaum, Hodge, Mayer (Fireside, 2003)

**EVALUATION CRITERIA:**

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 the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

Laptop and Cellphone Policy:

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

**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.

(NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS GET A BREAK ON THIS)

**HOMEWORK/ASSIGNMENTS**

**Assignments** Are due no later than 24 hours BEFORE each class, unless requested by the instructor. Remember, YOU are responsible for the instructor receiving your work. Late assignments will result in a lower grade.

**Name every document** you email me (or the group) as follows:

Your Name - Assignment Name.

For Example: **RICK-memory.doc**, or **RICK-memory.pdf** or **RICK-memory.fdx**

Refer to the SCHEDULE BELOW for due dates of specific assignments.

CTWR 413 grades will be based on careful consideration in the following areas of the students’ work:

* Student must demonstrate understanding of the fundamental principles of ideation, visualization, creating compelling characters and writing the scene via the weekly assignments.
* The student must demonstrate an understanding of how to write a short script
* The student must demonstrate the understanding of how to rewrite a scene.
* The student must demonstrate the ability to read and respond to other student’s work. Class participation includes full involvement in and contribution to all class discussions, as well as reading (in advance at times; see schedule) the assignments of the other students and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.
* Class attendance is mandatory, and includes being on time to class (otherwise, the students who present their material first are short-changed).
* You are allowed **one unexcused absence** (documentation required for excused absences). Beyond one, you will receive a reduction of one-third letter grade for each unexcused absence. (e.g., A- down to B+, B down to B-)
* Tardiness is unprofessional, and so will be considered unacceptable. You will be allowed **one unexcused tardiness.** After that, you will have your grade lowered by one-sixth of a letter grade for each occurrence. For example: Two tardies = A- to B+. BE ON TIME. IT IS HIGHLY INCONSIDERATE OF YOUR CLASSMATES NOT TO BE.

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%

**GRADING WEIGHTS:**

CTWR 413 grades are based on:

Participation: 10%

Weekly assignments: 60%

Final Script: 30%

**ASSIGNMENTS - WEIGHTS:**

* trip to school: 3%
* memory: 3%
* pivotal person: 3%
* assigned script: 5%
* roommates: 3%
* PP 180: 3%
* preparation for a date: 3%
* observation: 3%
* wrongest person: 3%
* seduction/persuasion: 3%
* pitch3: 3%
* choose one/ emotional beats: 3%
* 1st draft of #1: 5%
* pitch #2/emotional beats: 3%
* 1st draft of #2: 5%
* revise #2: 3%
* Chose final/rewrite: 3%
* 310 swapped: 3%

FINAL CTPR 310 SCRIPT: 30%

**SCHEDULE**

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

**(08/22)**

**Week 1: INTRODUCTIONS/ ATMOSPHERE & VISUALIZATION /MEMORY**

Expectations.

Ideation - how to think.

TRIP TO SCHOOL

• List the places you went to school. starting as far back as you can remember.

• List how you got to each school. Pick the hottest place/trip emotionally.

• List things, places, activities, people, clothes connected with that trip.

• Now describe one trip to the class, tell us how you got to school. (More “telling”, less “reading”.)

MEMORY:

Describe the following memories:

• My favorite toy as a child.

• A secret place I used to go.

1 page each. Describe the specifics of objects, person, place. Feelings and mood they engendered.

**HW: PIVOTAL PERSON** - biggest influence - *antagonist* (PROSE--not to be shared with the class)

Describe in detail an event in your life where someone "pushed your buttons" and made you react to their intent in a completely unexpected way; someone who changed you in a moment and made you see yourself or the world differently. Writing from an emotional place. (2-6 pages max)

**HW - READ** ASSIGNED SCRIPT --be prepared to discuss

**(08/29) NO CLASS**

**(09/05)**

**WEEK TWO: ROOMMATES**

**Part One**: Discuss the assigned script, MEMORY HW, then:

HOW TO WRITE IN SCREENPLAY FORMAT - for those who don't know... followed by

**Roommates**. Non-dialogue. Designed to introduce characters through visuals and props -- and conflict -- without seeing or hearing the characters themselves. In three parts. Length: A page and a half, tops.

*First part: Describe through sight and sounds a significant space shared by two interesting characters who are living together in* ***harmony****. Second part: Describe the same space, but now the characters are in apparent* ***conflict****. Third part: One of the characters is now* ***gone****, the remaining one has the location to his or herself. This should not be a guessing game. The point is to engage the audience and let us clearly know who these people are, and what the conflict is about. The elements in the second part ought to be* ***planted*** *in the first part, and may be missing or changed, or used again in the third.*

**HW: PIVOTAL PERSON - POV** that same pivotal moment from their POV. Walk a mile in their shoes. Writing the complete antagonist.

**(09/12)**

**WEEK THREE: PREPARATION FOR A DATE or SIGNIFICANT EVENT**

Also designed to build audience engagement and expectations. Introduces the use of props, costume, and character revealing activity and action. Helps the writer practice time ellipsis, the technique of planting and payoff, and/or repetition with a variation. And of course preparation and aftermath. In two parts.

Length: No more than a page total.

*Pick an interesting character and place him or her* ***alone*** *in a location* ***significant*** *to that character. (A home, an office, a combat bunker.) Show the character preparing for some character-revealing event, such as a crucial job interview, a murder, a confession, an encounter with aliens. Whatever. The point is to show through props and movement not only what the event is, but how the character feels about what's about to happen. This should not be a guessing game. We are not given clues, but glimpses into the character's hopes an dfears. It should be crystal clear what the event is when the character leaves the location. Then, ellipse time and show the character's return. (We do not see the primary scene of the event.) But when the character returns to his home, or aircraft hanger, or office...* ***we should know exactly what******happened*** *and how the character feels about it by changes in demeanor, costume, props, etc.*

**(09/19)**

**WEEK FOUR: OBSERVATION**

Selection and Observation.

1- Go to an open public place – outdoor market, a mall, a metro station – busy, with a range of people. Have a drink and watch until someone really captures your attention. Then observe everything you can about them. The figure,

clothes, walk, the things they carry, particular movements, gestures, haircut. **Don’t follow them. Don’t write anything.** Once you’re certain you have your person and have really studied them go home.

2 - Write as much detail as you can on a 3x5 file card. Put it in an envelope. Seal it. Get out a phone book ( or some 21st Century equivalent :). Open randomly. Put a finger on a family name. Write it on the envelope. Then do the same for

the first name. Onto the envelope. Do the same for an address. Onto the envelope. You’re done for the day. Repeat your trip on the next day. Pick another person. Another return home to record the observations. Another envelope with first and family name and address.

3- On the third day, open the two envelopes. Place the cards side by side. Ask: “What

would Character X do to Character Y to provoke Character Y to an extreme action?”

If that’s not enough, ask: “What is the tragic secret that either of them has, that he or she would kill to preserve?” Then write a short story built around these two characters and that conflict.

Length: 2 – 3 pages.

**(09/26)**

**WEEK FIVE: Dialogue Scene – “WRONGEST” PERSON / INTRUDER**

**The "Wrongest" Person.** A dialogue scene between **two** characters. Should build and employ many of elements already introduced (especially “Preparation for a Date”). Preparation, planting and pay-off, etc. (For some reason, writers tend to forget the simplest elements, like sound and light to help the audience expect a romantic or violent scene...) Designed to reveal character through conflict, to build suspense through cross-cutting and a ticking clock, and to practice dialogue -- including attitude, vernacular/voice, scene/plot advertising, exposition.

Length: As long as it needs to be, but hopefully not more than 3 or 4 pages.

*Character A prepares some location for character B's arrival, but character C shows up instead! This should be, for what we know of character A and his/her plans, the absolute worst person to appear. Character A must get rid of character C before he/she crosses paths with character B! But, character A cannot come out and say exactly why character C must leave. (“Listen mom, you gotta leave because I was*

*about to smoke crack with my favorite girl...” that cannot happen.) For this to work, the audience must know what is being planned and the stakes involved. Also, character C must be entirely motivated to stay. (Mom is sick and took the day off!, for example.)*

*The scene ends immediately when Character B arrives, whether*

*Character A is successful in getting rid of character C, or*

*not.*

**(10/03)**

**WEEK SIX: Dialogue Scene – SEDUCTION / PERSUASION**

The goal of this scene is to explore characters – their past and present relationships. This is a good scene to introduce the concept of exposition through conflict.

*One character wants another character to do something. The* *seducer should know which "buttons" to push. The goal should* *be appealing to the person being seduced, but that person* *should have legitimate, character revealing opposition. This* *need not be sexual or romantic. The seduction/persuasion* *should escalate. The scene ends when the seductee agrees or* *doesn’t.*

Length: 3 or 4 pages.

**[CTPR 310 TEACHERS WILL VISIT FOR 20 MINTUTES DURING WEEK 6 TO DESCRIBE PARAMETERS OF THE CLASS.]**

**HW Assignment for Week 7**: Prepare 3 ideas to pitch in class as 5 minute 310 scripts.

**(10/10)**

**WEEK SEVEN**: - **PITCHING 310 IDEAS.**

**HW Assignment for Week 8**: Refine Pitches/ CHOOSE #1

**Assignment 2:** write the EMOTIONAL BEATS of **310 #1** - what you think the main character will be experiencing as you will be writing (one page only)

**(10/17)**

**WEEK EIGHT: – DISCUSS EMOTIONAL BEATS/PITCHING 310 #1 & #2 IDEAS.**

**HW Assignment for Week 9**: First draft of script #1.

**(10/24)**

**WEEK NINE**: **REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #1**

**HW Assignment**: Revise script #1. Refine pitch of script #2

**(10/31)**

**WEEK TEN**: **REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #1**

**Pitch #2 if you haven't already**

**HW Assignment:** write the EMOTIONAL BEATS of **310 #2** - what you think the main character will be experiencing as you will be writing (one page only)

**HW Assignment**: Write first draft of script #2.

**(11/07)**

**WEEK ELEVEN**: **REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #2**

**HW Assignment**: Revise 310 script #2.

**(11/14)**

**WEEK TWELVE**: **REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #2**

*Students select one of the two revised scripts to pursue further*.

**HW Assignment**: Rewrite selected 310 script.

**HW Assignment** 310 swapped - you will re-write someone else's short and they will re-write yours. Get used to it.

**(11/21)**

**WEEK THIRTEEN**: **REVIEW & WORKSHOP REWRITTEN 310 SCRIPT**

**HW Assignment**: Revise rewritten selected 310 script.

**(11/28)**

**WEEK FOURTEEN**: **REVIEW REVISIONS.**

**HW Assignment**: Final polishes of selected 310 script.

**(12/05)**

**WEEK FIFTEEN: TABLE READS OF FINAL DRAFTS.**

**HW Assignment**: Final Script is due to CTPR 310 faculty by end of week 15.

**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](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank).

**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](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](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](http://dps.usc.edu/)

**PLEASE NOTE:**

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