

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
The John Wells Division of
Writing for Screen and Television

CTWR 505: **Creating The Short Film** (2 units)
19281D

Instructor: Rick Parks
Location: SCA 362
Time: 2-4:50pm TUESDAYS (beginning 01/08)
Hours: by appointment
Contact: rpparks@att.net
(818) 262-8091 (cell/text)

Course Objectives:

- 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. (507 & 508)
- DISCIPLINE: To understand the importance of rewriting.

Course Description:

This is an *introductory* course in writing for the screen, in which you will develop your resources as a storyteller: your memory and observation, your responsiveness to stories around you, and of course your imagination, your ability to create and develop compelling dramatic characters and cinematic conflict.

The class will take place in a workshop setting. Together we will read and critique a series of weekly assignments, both non-dialogue and dialogue, designed to help you understand the fundamentals of screenwriting, concentrating on the major building block of any dramatic work, the scene.

You will learn to bring your visual and aural senses to your writing, to see and hear your film as you write it, while at the same time you discover the importance of character as it is explored through situations of conflict.

During the semester you will be required to workshop your *CTPR 507 P1 & P2 scripts* in class. During the last four weeks of the semester you will apply all your skills to writing and rewriting *the 5 page, CTPR 508 screenplay*.

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:

Four feature screenplays or pilots (**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:

CTWR 505 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.

GRADING WEIGHTS:

CTWR 505 grades are based on:

- Weekly Assignments (including P2 Script).....50%
- Reading and Responding to Workshop Assignments.....20%
- Final 508 Script.....30%

LETTER GRADES:

100-93....A	82-80....B-	69-67.....D+
93-90.....A-	79-77....C+	66-63.....D
89-87.....B+	76-73....C	62-60.....D-
86-83.....B	72-70....C-	0-59.....F

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.

Laptop and Cell Phone 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.

Class Schedule:

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

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.

HOMEWORK/ASSIGNMENTS

CTWR 505 is a WORKSHOP. Assignments turned in late will result in a lower grade.

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.

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

Your Name - Assignment Name. - Format

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

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

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Week 1: INTRODUCTIONS/ MEMORY

Expectations.

Ideation - how to think.

What is a short film?

Watch these:

Go BWA--

In class assignments--

TRIP TO SCHOOL

- List the places you went to school.
- 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.

IN CLASS/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 1st ASSIGNED SCRIPT be prepared to discuss

WEEK TWO: MEMORY 2

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

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

HW - Mood and Atmosphere. Designed to build the writer's sense of a compelling location. The goal is to engage the audience without introducing action, through light, use of sound, and visuals. **PROSE**

1. Write a 1 page prose story based on one of the four memories (trip to school, toy, place, person.) Think of it as a five minute non-dialogue idea. Could this be a P1 Project?
2. Atmosphere exercise:

--In three parts. Length: No more than a page total. Make the audience expect something to happen. 1. Fear. 2. Romance. 3. Comedy.

*The assignment: Pick a cinematic location. Describe the sights and sounds of that location in order to make the audience think that something: **romantic** is about to take place. The scene ends when your character enters the location. Repeat with the same location, but use the sights and sounds to make the audience expect that something **frightening or violent** is going to take place. As before, the scene ends when the same character enters the scene. Repeat a third time using sights and sounds to make the audience expect something **humorous** is about to happen.*

These scenes and/or moments are not connected into a larger story. Time can pass. (A location that is vibrant and full of life can be run-down and old, for example.)

Also, the fear or love or laughs should not come from the character's interaction or movement. The goal is to get the audience to expect something will happen. Bad example: Show the banana peel, but not the man slipping....)

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

WEEK THREE – P1 & ATMOSPHERE

In class:

1. Discuss 1 page Memory stories.
2. Read atmosphere exercise, discuss format, description, planting and payoff.

Assignments for next week:

1) Write **5 page** idea for 507 P1. **Deliver by 10AM the day before class.** (Can be based on memory assignment or new idea.) Who is the main character? What is the world they live in? What is their dramatic problem in the story?

2) “Experience” assignment: Choose A or B and write about it.

a) *My moment of greatest pride and moment of deepest shame.*

b) *My moment of greatest joy and moment of greatest terror.*

Length: 1 page each.

WEEK FOUR - GROUP A & B 507 Project 1 script, and “EXPERIENCE” exercise.

Part 1) Discuss GROUP A & B scripts for 507 PROJECT 1. (10 mins per student)

Part 2) “Experience” assignment. Describe:

- My moment of greatest pride and moment of deepest shame.
- My moment of greatest joy and moment of greatest terror.

Length: 1 page each.

Assignment for next week:

- 1) Revise P1 scripts. **Deliver by 10AM the day before class.**
- 2) “Preparation For A Date” assignment. Two short non-dialogue

scenes.

Designed to build audience engagement and expectation. Introduces the use of props, costume, and character revealing activity -- but not necessarily dramatic 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. (First scene = 1/2 page) of "preparation", second scene (1/3 page) of "aftermath".

*Pick an interesting character and place him or her in a location significant to that character. (A home, an office, a combat bunker.) Show that 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 and fears. 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.*

WEEK FIVE - Discuss Group B & C 507 Project 1 scripts, and "Preparation For A Date".

- 1): Discuss GROUP B & C 507 Project 1 scripts. (10 mins per student)
- 2) Read Preparation For A Date.

Assignments for next week:

- 1) Revise 507 Project 1 scripts.
- 2) "True/False" assignment. (Write two small, two paragraph, stories. One absolutely true. One false.

Class tries to determine which one is which and why.

WEEK SIX -- 507 Project 1 Scripts continued and "TRUE/FALSE"

- 1) Read and discuss GROUP B & C 507 PROJECT 1 scripts.
- 2) Read "TRUE/FALSE" stories.

[507 GROUP A SHOOTS P1 THIS WEEKEND]

Assignment for next week:

"WRONGEST PERSON/INTRUDER" Dialogue scene.

WEEK SEVEN -- Dialogue Scene – "WRONGEST" PERSON / INTRUDER.

The "Wrongest" Person/Intruder. A dialogue scene between two characters. Should build and employ many of elements already introduced. Preparation, planting and pay-off, etc. (For some reason, writers tend to forget atmosphere again, like sound and light, to help the audience expect a romantic or violent scene...) Designed to reveal character through conflict, to build suspense through 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, from what we know of character A and his/her plans, the absolute worst person who could arrive. 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...". 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.

[507 GROUP B SHOOTS P1 THIS WEEKEND]

Assignments for next week:

- 1) Write a paragraph for **two** ideas for **507 Project 2** films.
- 2) "SIGNIFICANT OBJECT" Dialogue scene. 3 pages.

The goal of this scene is to build audience's expectations by using a significant prop. This scene should employ many of the elements practiced so far, including preparation, use of light and sound, manipulating time, motivated opposing characters, suspense and surprise, reversal and character change.

A character prepares for a significant encounter and plans to use a certain object. Because of the conflict with a second (or more) character(s) the prop ends up being used in an entirely different way. (Cheap gift of perfume; a failed apology; the perfume is used as poison.)

3 to 4 pages.

- 3) Read "Breaking Bad" Pilot.

WEEK EIGHT -- GROUP "A" 507 PROJECT 2 IDEAS. "SIGNIFICANT OBJECT" Dialogue scene. BREAKING BAD PILOT.

- 1) Discuss group A Project 2 ideas. (6 mins per student.)
- 2) Dialogue Scene – SIGNIFICANT OBJECT
- 3) Discuss "Breaking Bad" pilot. How they grab audience's attention. How they establish sympathy for main character.

[507 GROUP C SHOOTS P1 THIS WEEKEND]

Assignments for next week:

- 1) Group B 507 Project 2 ideas, 2) prepare an idea for a **short 5 minute documentary**: a portrait of a place, a person, or a process. (Bring in a newspaper article or web download you used to research doc idea.)

WEEK NINE -- DISCUSS GROUP B 507 Project 2 IDEAS, and Documentary ideas.

- 1) Discuss Group B P2 ideas. (6 mins per student)

- 2) Discuss documentary ideas (person, place or process).

Assignment for WEEK 11:

- 1) Group "C" 507 Project 2 pitches, 2) "SEDUCTION / PERSUASION SCENE"
Length (3 – 4 pages)

Somebody 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 seducee agrees or doesn't.

WEEK TEN -- SPRING RECESS !!

WEEK ELEVEN -- GROUP C PROJECT 2 IDEAS, SEDUCTION / PERSUASION SCENES.

- 1) Discuss Group C P2 ideas.
- 2) Read Seduction scenes.
- 3) Visit from 508 faculty.

[507 GROUP A SHOOTS P2 THIS WEEKEND]

Assignment for next week:

Prepare 4 (one-paragraph each) ideas for **508 script**.

WEEK TWELVE -- CTPR 508 and THE 5 PAGE SHORT SCRIPT 1

- Pitch 508 project ideas in class for feedback.

[507 GROUP B SHOOTS P2 THIS WEEKEND]

Assignment for next week:

Choose **two** ideas and write them up as a one-page each synopsis.

WEEK THIRTEEN -- THE 508 SHORT SCRIPT 2

- Discuss two 508 ideas in class for feedback.

Assignment for Next Week:

508s SWAPPED - the object is to be objective - write a version of someone else's 508 idea, the way you see it, based what they've pitched. Focus on tone, ideation and emotional truths.

Assignment 2: write the EMOTIONAL BEATS of your own 508 - what you think the main character will be experiencing as you will be writing (one page only)

[507 GROUP C SHOOTS P2 THIS WEEKEND]

WEEK FOURTEEN -- THE SHORT SCRIPT 4

- Discuss 508 scripts.

Assignment for next week:

Choose one idea and write the 5-page script. Email to class. Read classmates first draft script.

WEEK FIFTEEN -- THE SHORT SCRIPT 3

- Discuss second 508 script.

Assignment:

Write 5 page script for **second** 508 idea. Email scripts. Read colleagues scripts.

WEEK SIXTEEN -- LAST CLASS. DELIVER COMPLETED SCRIPTS.

- Discuss scripts.

WEEK SEVENTEEN -- STUDY DAYS

EMAIL **EXAM / SUMMARY PROJECT** TO INSTRUCTOR AND CLASSMATES.

Choose and rewrite 508 script. Email scripts. Read classmates scripts.

[SUMMARY PROJECT = Analyze and write up strengths and weaknesses of each 508 script. (including your own) One page - double spaced - per project.]

*Note: Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure this letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.- 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The telephone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

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>
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