

**School of Cinematic Arts
The John Wells Division of
Writing for Screen and Television**

**CTWR 412: Introduction to Screenwriting
Spring 2019**

Instructor:	Toni Ann Johnson
Class Schedule:	Wednesdays, 4:00 PM—6:50 PM
Class Location:	ROOM SCA 259
Office Hours:	By Appointment
Contact Information:	johnson.toniann@gmail.com

Course Objective:

- Introduction to the craft of visual and dramatic writing—what makes screenwriting different from prose?
- To learn and practice the elements of a “good story well told.”
- To learn to conceive compelling ideas, characters, and stories through experience and observation.
- To learn narrative 3-Act structure.
- To learn the building blocks of the dramatic scene.
- To write a short screenplay.

Course Description:

This is an introductory course in writing for the screen.

There will be weekly lessons on the fundamentals of screenwriting, however this is primarily a workshop class. You'll be putting what you learn to use in a series of writing assignments and you'll share these and discuss with your classmates. You'll develop your ability to draw on your observations, memories, experiences, and imagination to create compelling characters and stories for the screen. You'll bring your visual and aural senses to your writing, to see and hear your film as you write it and explore your characters through situations of conflict. Ultimately, you'll complete a short film script.

Course Reading:

Handouts – to be provided

You'll read **two feature screenplays** (from produced films) and answer a set of questions to be provided. You may choose these scripts, however, please run them by me for approval in advance.

The Lost Art of Story: The Anatomy of Chaos by Adam Skelter (available on Amazon via kindle) You can download Kindle for Mac or Kindle for PC free.
Recommended viewing: Lessons from The Screenplay – multiple videos on screenwriting available online
Anatomy of Chaos video lecture series

Grading Criteria:

This is a workshop class. Participation is essential. Attendance is mandatory. You must participate in class discussions, read your classmates' submissions, and provide constructive feedback. You will complete two short film scripts. And you will read and analyze two feature scripts.

Participation:	10%
Reading assignments	10%
Homework	40%
Final Short script:	40%

	100%

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%

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 proof your assignment prior to submission.

Script Format: You will be required to write in standard script format. There are numerous software programs available. FINAL DRAFT typically offers a student discount. Celtx is a free software program. Amazon has a free screenwriting software program as well.

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.

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:

EXPLAIN YOUR POLICY ON LAPTOPS AND CELL PHONES.

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 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.

Class Schedule:

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

JAN 9th Week 1: INTRO TO STORY STRUCTURE

- Introduction. Who I am. Who you are.
- Syllabus review
- How is a screenplay different from prose?
- Discuss screenwriting software and PDFs (how to submit your work for class)
- Look at a short film
- Look at a short script (for FORMAT)
- What is a scene?
- Introduction to basic 3-Act STORY STRUCTURE. –Handout provided.

In class assignment – TRIP TO SCHOOL

Creating a sense of place and atmospheric locations is part of the writer's job. Lighting, time of day, weather, architecture, use of sound, props and objects all help create mood and the world of your story.

- List the places you went to school starting as far back as you can remember.
- List how you got to each school. Pick the place/trip that affects you most, emotionally.
- List things, places, activities, people, clothes connected with that trip
- Now describe one trip, and describe for us how you got to school.

Homework assignment: 1) Write ONE scene based on your experience of one of those memories. (No more than 2 to 3 pages.) Pick one that's meaningful to you. A "scene" typically happens a one time and in one location between the same people. If you move from one location to the next, that is likely more than one scene. Please choose ONE scene, not multiple scenes.

The scene should involve some sort of CONFLICT: Protagonist's desire vs. the other person's, (or situation). Give the scene a beginning, middle, and end. Use proper screenplay format. **Save as a PDF, deliver to your classmates and to me by the start of class.** Be prepared to read/discuss in class.

Homework Part 2: Read Chapter 1 in The Lost Art of Story: The Anatomy of Chaos : Story Structure Part 1

JAN 16th Week 2: CHARACTER

- Read and discuss students' scenes.
- Discuss: Writing only what we see and hear.
- Discuss CHARACTER and techniques to help develop characters. (handouts as PDFs provided)
- Lessons from the Screenplay lecture on American Beauty

--Review screenplay structure, Acts,
character/conflict.

In class writing exercise: Roommates. Non-dialogue. Designed to introduce characters through VISUALS and PROPS and CONFLICT, **without actually 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**. (We don't see them, only the SPACE).*

Second part: *Describe the same space, but now the characters are in apparent conflict.*

Third part: *Again describe the same space, but one of the characters is now **gone**, the remaining one has the location to his or herself. 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.*

Homework: Think about a KITCHEN from your childhood, before the age of 18. What memories of things that took place there come to mind?

Write A SCENE that takes place in that kitchen that involves CONFLICT, wherein a character wants something and something or someone impedes that person's ability to have it or get it. It can be comedic or dramatic. If you have a specific memory that works, use that. OR, you may write a scene *inspired* by a memory, but that's fictional. It can also be a scene wherein the conflict involves you, but it doesn't have to be. You might choose a scene in which you were present, but *not* part of the conflict—something you witnessed. Be aware of specific details in the space that likely wouldn't be exactly the same in someone else's kitchen. Give the scene a beginning, middle and end. Keep it under 5 pages.

As you write, focus on what we HEAR (dialogue) and on WHAT WE SEE ON THE SCREEN. Don't write anything we would not see or hear if it were on the screen. (No explaining backstory or telling what the character relationships are. Show it.) Ask yourself: *could this be executed visually?* And if it could not, do not include it. Write what we see happening in the present tense.

Email to me and your classmates by the start of class. Be prepared to read and discuss in class.

Homework Part II: Read Anatomy of Chaos, Chapter 4: Character and Theme

JAN 23 Week 3:

CHARACTER WANTS AND NEEDS

- Read and discuss students' scenes
- View Anatomy of Chaos Character and Theme Video
- View Lessons from the Screenplay Shaun of the Dead (character Need/Desire/Weakness)
- Reading assignment instructions handed out; **1st DUE FEB.**

13, 2nd Due March 20

Homework: Preparation for a Date or Significant Event (two short scenes)

Pick an interesting CHARACTER and place him or her ALONE in a location significant to that character (their home/office/place of business etc.) 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 DIALOGUE) not only what the event is, but how the character FEELS about what's about to happen. Let us see glimpses into the characters hopes and fears. It should be 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 or event.) but whe the character returns to his home, office or wherever, we should know what happened and how the character feels about it by changes in demeanor, costumes, props, etc. Length: Shouldn't be more than 3 pages long.
Email to your classmates and to me by the start of class.

Homework Park 2: Read Chapter 6 in The Lost Art of Story: Dialogue Part 1: Subtext

JAN 30 Week 4: **DIALOGUE AND SUBTEXT**

- Read/discuss students homework
- Divide into groups A and B**
- View dialogue and Subext video
- View clip of scene with subtext
- Reminder—if you haven't already, get started on reading assignment.**

In class exercise - Dialogue Scene – “WRONGEST” PERSON / INTRUDER

The "Wrongest" Person. A dialogue scene between **two** characters. 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: Not more than 3 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.

Homework: Everyone, continue working on dialogue scene and submit as assignment. Monday by 4pm (48 hours prior to class.)

Everyone (both groups) read and make written notes on Group A's scripts; Notes due via email by the start of class.

Group B, cast your characters among your classmates in advance; Your scenes will be read and critiqued in class. Please be ready to go at the start of class.

Homework Part II: Read Chapter 2 in *The Lost Art of Story*: Story Structure Part 2

FEB 6 Week 5:

MORE ON STRUCTURE

--Read/Discuss group B's assignments (group A should have received notes

--Structure handout (Anatomy of chaos)

--Review Act Structure and discuss STAKES: what are the consequences if the character doesn't get what he or she wants?

--Review protagonist's internal and external conflict, what do they want/need

--New video lecture on Structure (Anatomy of Chaos) Part 2

--go over: inciting incident, end of Act 1, midpoint, End of Act 2, Climax, Resolution

Michael Hague articles: Plotting & 5 Key Turning points (links provided)

Reminder: Reading assignment due next week.

Homework: OBSERVATION. Go to an open public place where there are a lot of people around—an outdoor market, a mall, metro station—someplace busy with people. Hang out and watch people until someone really captures your attention. Then observe everything about them: their body type, clothes, walk, hair, gestures and movements, the things they carry, voice if you hear it. **Don't follow them and don't write anything yet.**

Once you have your person, go somewhere and write down all the details you can remember. Then make up a name and life for this person. Imagine where they're from, what their upbringing was like—parents, siblings, lifestyle, and what their life is like *now*. What kind of neighborhood do they live in? Who are their friends/family/colleagues? Now make up a secret that this person has—something that hurts them and/or causes shame or embarrassment. Once you have that secret, WRITE A SCENE wherein that person has to say goodbye to or end a relationship with someone they care about (create this person from memory or imagination), because of that secret.

But the person whom they are leaving (could be a parent/a child/friend/lover) will do anything to keep them from going.

If your main person does not leave, the consequences should be extreme (high stakes). Maybe he or she will die, or be miserable, or someone else will, or perhaps someone else will be at risk.

And If your main person *does* leave, the consequences for the other person should be extreme, too. Perhaps that person's life will fall apart, or some physical or emotional harm will come to them.

Length: ONE scene, 3--6 pages

Everyone submit Monday by 4PM, earlier is fine. Everyone **make notes on Group B's** scenes. Notes are DUE BY THE START OF CLASS. Group A, cast your characters among your classmates; your scenes will be read and critiqued in class.

Homework Part 2: Read Chapter 6: Scene Dynamics in *The Lost Art of Story*.

***Reading assignment due next week.**

FEB 13 Week 6: **SCENE DYNAMICS**

- Students deliver Reading assignment #1
- Read/discuss Group A's** homework scenes Group B should have received written notes
- Scene dynamics: what are the elements of a scene?
- View video on scene dynamics
- Discuss questions to ask when writing a scene...

Homework: Write a "REAL LIFE RE-DO" scene.

Choose a personal situation from your own life that you wish you'd handled better. Write a brief paragraph in prose describing the real life incident. Then write the scene as if you'd be having the way you wish you had. Use your own names.

Both groups, submit your paragraphs/scenes, Tuesday by 4 PM.
Be prepared to read your story in class.

FEB 20 Week 7: **MORE ON DIALOGUE**

- Read/discuss scenes (both groups)
- Dialogue Tips – Read Article in class
- Discuss SUBPLOTS – view video on Subplots

Homework: Brainstorm an idea for a very short film screenplay (that will be 6 pages or fewer.) Write a paragraph describing the idea. Be mindful that when executed, the idea should have three acts. The paragraph should give some sense of the genre (comedy/drama/thriller etc.) We should also learn WHO's in the story. WHAT they want. WHERE it takes place. WHEN it takes place. And WHAT happens.

Though you're writing a prose paragraph, practice writing it VISUALLY and in the present tense. Write what we will SEE and HEAR. Don't write explanations, or backstory.

You may write about whatever you wish. If narrowing down an idea is challenging, consider drawing inspiration from an embarrassing moment in your life, or a memory that has emotional significance for you.

Both groups submit ideas 48 hours before class. Monday by 4pm

FEB 27 Week 8: **OUTLINES**

- Read/discuss students' ideas (both groups).
- Discussion on Outlines. What IS an outline?
- View example of a short script outline.
- In class practice on writing scene outline for Act I.

Homework: Write an outline of scenes in three acts for your chosen short film idea. Include Slug lines and Action—tell us what happens in the scenes. You don't have to include dialogue, but if dialogue comes to you, you may include some of it.

Both groups submit your outline by Monday at 4pm. **Make notes on GROUP A's outlines.** Notes are due by the start of class. Group B's outlines will be read/discussed in class.

MAR 6 Week 9:

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

- discuss opening and closing images in films and stories
- View opening and closing images of films.
- discuss Set ups and Pay offs: What are they?

--**Read group B's outlines** (group A should have received written notes.)

Homework: (due after break) Write a fully executed draft (scene headings /action/dialogue) of your script.

BOTH GROUPS submit by Monday March 18th at 4pm. **Make notes on group B's scripts.** Notes due by the start of class.

Group A's scripts will be read in class. (Group A cast your scripts in advance.)

*Reminder, Reading assignment #2 is due after the break on March 20th

MARCH 13 - NO CLASS SPRING BREAK

MAR 20 Week 10: **REVERSAL Of EXPECTATION**

--Second READING ASSIGNMENT delivered.

--**Read Group A's first draft scripts** in class (B's should have received notes)

--discuss reversal of expectation--the audience expects one thing, but the script surprises the audience and delivers something else. View scene that demonstrates this.

Homework: Revise short script.

Everyone (both groups) submit revised script 48 hours prior to next class Wednesday by 10AM.

Everyone (both groups) **make written notes on Group A's revised scripts.** (Notes due by start of class)

Group B, cast your scripts in advance. They will be read and discussed in class.

Homework Part II: Watch Bend It Like Beckham

Answer: 1. Who is the protagonist? 2. What does she want? 3. What does she need? 4. What is the inciting incident? 5. What is the end of the first act? 6. What is the act 2 low point? 7. What are some of the set ups and pay offs?
submit via email by the start of class.

MAR 27 Week 11: **CINEMATIC TENSION**

***Second reading assignment due**

--**Read Group B's revised scripts in class** (Group A should have received notes.

--Discuss cinematic tension; view examples

--Discuss pitching: What is a pitch? How to practice?

--View Short film

Homework: Write two pitches for your short film idea. Write a paragraph for each. The paragraph should be written in the present tense, visually, and should tell us what we'll see and hear in your movie. Tell us the story as it would appear on screen.
Everyone: Submit your pitch paragraphs Monday by 4pm

APR 3 Week 12: PITCHES

All students pitch their ideas and pick one to write.
In class exercise, write a biography of the main character for your chosen pitch. (Worksheet to help you provided.)

Homework: Refine your chosen idea and turn it into an outline of scenes.

APR 10 Week 13: PROTAGONIST'S OVERALL WANT/ACTIVE WANTS IN EACH SCENE

--Workshop students' outlines
--using students' work, discuss OVERALL wants and specific wants within scenes

Homework: Write the first draft of your screenplay. Everyone cast their scripts among classmates and be prepared to have read in class.

Deliver your scripts via email Monday by 4pm. Everyone make notes on BOTH groups scripts.

APR 17 Week 14: CHARACTER ACTION and ACTIVITY

--Workshop first drafts of screenplay both groups
-- Discus how to use a character action to reveal change
--View French toast 1 & 2 Kramer Vs. Kramer

Homework: Revise short script and submit by Monday @4pm.

APRIL 24 Week 15 THEME and MOTIF

--view video on theme and motif
--Workshop revised scripts
--View short films

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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