

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
JOHN WELLS DIVISION
WRITING FOR SCREEN & TELEVISION

CTWR 412

Section 19168D - Introduction to Screenwriting (2 units)
Fall 2019

Instructor: Rick Parks

Location: SCA 362

Time: 4-6:50 PM MONDAYS

Office Hours: by appointment

Contact Info: rpparks@att.net
(818) 262-8091 (cell/text)

Course Objective:

This course is an introduction to the art and practice of writing the dramatic screenplay. Students will gain an understanding of the elements of dramatic structure, theme, plot, character and dialogue, and begin to find their own voice as screenwriters.

- 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.
- 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.

This course is primarily a collaborative workshop in which students will present their work in class, and learn to give and receive notes intended to advance the individual writer's narrative goals within the perimeters of accepted screenwriting practices. The emphasis will be on dramatic construction and character-driven stories. For their final projects, each student will pitch ideas to the class, and then draft and revise a short screenplay (10-20 pages).

Decorum:

The professor expects all students to respect and support the ideas and writing 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 negative attacks will reflect poorly on the student 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 revealing how to make it better. We should strive at all times for constructive criticism.

Issues:

If any issues or concerns arise with any member of the classroom, which might affect a supportive learning environment, the professor would highly encourage the student to contact him privately to seek a resolution.

Individual Meetings:

Students are encouraged to take advantage of the professor's availability. The professor will answer questions by email, skype or face time, but would rather answer them in depth during class, so that the other students may benefit from discussing individual story/character/structure problems.

HOMEWORK AND NOTES:

Homework is due, via **email**, 24/48 hours before class, in order to give your classmates (and the professor) time to read/analyze your work, and to be prepared to give coherent, well thought out and intelligent notes.

Notes on work are due (via email) at least 20 minutes before the 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 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, 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.

PRESENTATION:

As this is a writing class, formatting errors, typos, bad spelling, grammar and overall sloppiness are NOT ACCEPTABLE.

Exceptions will be made for students whose primary language is not English.

Naming your documents:

eg: YourName-AssignmentName.doxx

Or: **DEBBY-characters.fdx** , or: **SMITH-characters.fdx**

For printed material: Put your name, title and page number on the Header of EACH PAGE of your material. Refer to the SCHEDULE for due dates of specific assignments.

FINAL DRAFT: As the professor (and his working peers) prefers Final Draft and the school provides it in at least a discounted or temporary format, he would prefer that *unless noted*, all screenwriting assignments be completed in the Final Draft program, so that if and when you are writing any scene work, both you and he can benefit from his NOTES on your work.

UNEXCUSED, LATE ASSIGNMENTS WILL BE DOCKED 50%.

Imperative reading:

(In addition to select screenplays)

Save The Cat by Blake Snyder - Michael Wiese Productions, -try AMAZON

The Writer's Journey by Christopher Vogler 3rd ed. Michael Wiese Productions

The Tools of Screenwriting by David Howard and Edward Mabley

ATTENDANCE:

Class attendance is mandatory, and includes being on time (otherwise, the students who present their material first are short-changed).

You will be allowed **one**, unexcused tardiness. After that, you will have your grade lowered by one-third letter grade for each occurrence.

BE ON TIME. IT IS HIGHLY INCONSIDERATE TO YOUR PEERS IF YOU ARE NOT.

Two late arrivals equates to one full absence.

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.

In order for an absence to be excused the student must have approval from the professor and provide documentation at the next attended class session.

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.

SICK POLICY

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

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:

Students are encouraged to **bring laptops to class** to take notes and review work. However, **internet usage during class is allowed only for class discussion.**

(I will call you out)

Cellphone use is not allowed, except before and after class and during breaks.

Recording Devices:

You may not record lectures or workshops without the consent of the instructor.

GRADING

grades are based on:

- Trip to school/Memory
- Pivotal person
- Script read
- Mood
- Pp 180°
- Preparation
- Character/environment
- True/false
- Wrongest person
- Significant object
- Creative lie
- Documentary
- Seduction/persuasion
- Pitches
- First pages.....(all 4% each)

- Rewrite of first page..... 5%
- Second pages..... 5%
- Final Script..... 20%
- Participation.....10%

As per Writing Division policy the following is a breakdown of numeric 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%

As the standards for the USC School of Cinematic arts are higher than other institutions, **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. "A"'s are for outstanding work. There may be **only one A grade** in this class, make it yours.

If you shine, I will notice. If you fall back, I will also notice. Everyone succeeds in my class.

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.

Class Schedule:

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

Date Week Teaching:

08/26 Wk. 1 **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 ASSIGNED SCRIPT --be prepared to discuss

09/02 Wk. 2 **LABOR DAY**

09/09 Wk. 3 **Discuss the script, MEMORY HW,**
Loosely discuss 'PP' (no details!)

then: HOW TO WRITE IN SCREENPLAY FORMAT - for those who don't know how

IN CLASS/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.

1. Write a 1-page 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 short?
2. Atmosphere exercise:
--In three parts. 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.

NOTE: 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, 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....)

PROSE Length: No more than a page total.

HW: PIVOTAL PERSON – 180° that same pivotal moment from their POV. Walk a mile in their shoes. Writing the complete antagonist.

09/16 Wk. 4 **Present and discuss Mood and Atmosphere**
Loosely discuss 'PP 180°'

Assignment : "Preparation for a date or significant event"

Two short scenes:

The first: (1/2 to 1/3 page) of "preparation", the second: (1/4 page) of "aftermath". 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. **PROSE** Length: One page total.

SPECIFICALLY: 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.

PROSE Length: One page total.

09/23 Wk. 5 **Present and discuss "Preparation for a date."**

Assignment: "Character Environment"

A character visits a location three times.

This exercise, also non-dialogue, should build on Atmosphere and Preparation for a Date, while also allowing the writer (in a short, simple form) to use surprise, mystery, twist and suspense, and engage the audiences' hopes and fears. The writer also practices manipulating time.

In three parts:

First part: A character discovers, or stumbles upon, an interesting location. It is new to him or her. It evokes a sense of mystery in the audience. Perhaps fear as well. Or hope, depending on the exploration and what the character finds. The character should find something or somebody unexpected. (Some writers will keep this element a surprise to the audience as well; others may show the new element before the character does, building a moment of suspense.)

Second part: Time has passed. (How does the audience know? How much time? A day? A month? Several years?) The character now returns to the location, but is motivated to engage the element discovered in the first part. Is this now a romantic encounter? A deadly one? A quest for knowledge? An attempt to help someone or some thing? The goal is either achieved or not, but the action should reveal something about the main character and his or her counterpart.

Third part: Time has passed. (Again, visual clues.) The character returns for the third time. The second element or person is now gone. The location may or may not be significantly changed, but the main character should be. He or she should be much different - because of these encounters, the goal reached or lost - than he/she was in the opening. **PROSE** Length: 1-2 pages, maybe a page and a half.

09/30 Wk. 6 **Present and discuss "Character Environment" assignment.**

Scene structure lecture

Assignment: "True/False"

Write two short, one or two paragraph stories. One true. One false.

10/07 Wk. 7 **Present and discuss "True/False" assignments.**

Class tries to determine which one is which and why.

Assignment: "Wrongest Person"

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 cross-cutting and a ticking clock, and to practice dialogue -- including attitude, vernacular/voice, scene/plot advertising, exposition.

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. 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.

(Final Draft!) Length: 3-4 pages.

10/14 Wk. 8

Present and discuss "Wrongest Person" assignment.

'First pages' hand out - discussion

Assignment: "Significant Object"

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.

SPECIFICALLY: 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 perfume; a failed apology; the perfume is used as poison.

(Final Draft!) Length: 3-4 pages.

Assignment: "Three ideas for documentaries"

Prepare **three ideas** for short documentaries: a portrait of a

place, a portrait of a person, and a portrait of a process. (Bring in a newspaper article or web download you used to research doc ideas.)

- 10/21 Wk. 09 **Present and discuss “Significant Object” assignment.**
DISCUSS DOCUMENTARY IDEAS, with an emphasis on what makes a great launching pad for a story

Assignment: “Creative Lie”

Dialogue scene between two characters. As with all the others, the writer should employ elements practiced all semester, including suspense, engaging audiences' hopes and fears, surprise, mystery, escalation, distinctive dialogue. A character tells a lie to either pursue some objective or to escape some trouble. The audience must know it is a lie. The lie should escalate. The person being lied to should be entirely motivated to block the character's goal.

(Final Draft!) Length: 3-4 pages.

- 10/28 Wk. 10 Present and discuss “Creative Lie” assignment.

Assignment: “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.

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 seduced either agrees or doesn't.

(Final Draft!) Length: 3-4 pages.

IDEATE **three short pitches** for your FINAL PROJECT, (a short screenplay of 10-20 pages).

DISCUSS PITCHES

Class will help students choose the most appropriate idea to focus on for remainder of course.

Discuss seduction/persuasion

Assignment: Bring 3 great **first pages** into class, one of which you've written. (Final Draft!)

- 11/04 Wk. 11 **DISCUSS FIRST PAGES**
Assignment: Re-write your page one – beat out the rest of your short

11/18 Wk. 13 Discuss pages/beats
Assignment: continue writing - the goal is 15 pages, due ASAP

11/25 Wk. 14 Rewriting of pages

THANKSGIVING

12/02 Wk. 15 **Final notes and discussions / recap of what we've learned.**
FINAL DRAFT IS DUE AT END OF FINALS WEEK

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

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" 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, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Support Systems:

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

engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling

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

Student Health Leave Coordinator – 213-821-4710

Located in the USC Support and Advocacy office, the Health Leave Coordinator processes requests for health leaves of absence and advocates for students taking such leaves when needed.

<https://policy.usc.edu/student-health-leave-absence/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call

suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

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

engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) | Title IX - (213) 740-5086
equity.usc.edu, titleix.usc.edu

Information about how to get help or help a survivor of harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following protected characteristics: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations.

Bias Assessment Response and Support - (213) 740-2421
studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions for appropriate investigation and response.

The Office of Disability Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776
dsp.usc.edu

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

USC Support and Advocacy - (213) 821-4710
studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssg

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101
diversity.usc.edu

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call
dps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call
dps.usc.edu

Non-emergency assistance or information.

Diversity and Inclusion

Diversity and Inclusion are foundational to the SCA community. We are committed to fostering a welcoming and supportive environment where students of all identities and backgrounds can flourish. The classroom should be a space for open discussion of ideas and self-expression; however, SCA will not tolerate verbal or written abuse, threats, harassment, intimidation or violence against person or property. If students are concerned about these matters in the classroom setting they are encouraged to contact their SCA Diversity and Inclusion Liaison, <http://cinema.usc.edu/about/diversity.cfm>; e-mail diversity@cinema.usc.edu. You can also report discrimination based on a protected class here <https://equity.usc.edu/harassment-or-discrimination/>

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.

PLEASE NOTE:

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