

University of Southern California
School of Cinematic Arts
John Wells Division of Writing for Screen & Television
Fall, 2019

CTWR 412: Introduction to Screenwriting

Thursdays, 4 pm, SCA 214 (19171R, 2 units)

Professor: Jason E. Squire

Course Objective: Welcome to this class, devoted to learning the essential building blocks of the screenplay including visualization, dialogue, character, narrative, scene structure, conflict and sequencing.

Course Description: You will be challenged to flex and focus your powers of invention and expression as you progress from writing descriptive scenes to scenes with dialogue and description, to combining scenes into a sequence, then building sequences into short scripts.

Along the way, you will be working on creating dramatic situations, injecting complications, developing visual story-telling, how to approach character and dialogue, planning scenes and dealing with format, sounds, plants, payoffs, tension, misdirection, resolution, ticking clocks, industry practice and jargon.

Each assignment will include one-line character bios, a title and pitch, along with your name, date and assignment number. Also, **each one is to be rewritten** and handed back the following week. If absent, the assignment due must be in the Instructor's SCA 404 mailbox by class time or will result in grade reduction.

It is your responsibility to take charge of your progress. If you happen to fall behind for any reason, you are expected to volunteer to present any late assignments at the next class session without prompting.

Guidelines: The emphasis is on careful writing, analyzed under the open scrutiny of your peers. Assignments will be distributed for round-table discussion on the day they are due. They are of course expected to be on time and of professional quality in terms of format, spelling and syntax. Make sure to **proof-read** and correct your work before handing it in.

You are encouraged to be vocal in applying plain common sense to the creative issues at hand in this workshop setting. This will help develop the kind of critical thinking that will serve you well throughout your writing career.

Since meetings are run like a professional story conference, each member will also come away with experience in how to give and take constructive suggestions and

how to solve a wide range of writing issues brought to the table within the assignments.

Important: If you hit a snag during writing, call me anytime (instead of email). **Writing is re-writing**, and I want to help you achieve your fullest potential. My phone number is 310-208-8420; office hours Tuesday afternoon.

Grading: Your level of performance, improvement and on-time assignments will be evaluated in grading, broken down as follows:

Assignments 1 thru 5, 7 and 8: 10% each
 First short script: 15%
 Second short script: 15%

Please pay careful attention to due dates and, naturally, arriving to class on time and ready to work. These are basic examples of professionalism.

Writing Division Attendance Policy: Students are expected be on time and prepared for each class. Two unexcused absences will result in your grade being lowered by one full point (ex: A to A-). A third unexcused absence will result in your grade being lowered another full point (ex: B to B-). Your grade will be lowered by one point for every absence thereafter. Two late arrivals equates to one unexcused absence. Assignments turned in late will also result in grade reduction.

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

If you have an emergency, please contact your professor before class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

General Suggestions: Read as many professional screenplays as you can; you are expected to read at least five during the semester, from a mix of genres. A treasure trove can be found online and in our own Cinematic Arts Library in the basement of Doheny Library. They also have a vast array of movies on DVD, which you should refer to in order to understand title references that come up in class. The Writing Division also has a fine collection; visit SCA 335 for details.

Continue to read literature and short stories on your own. And go to the movies, endlessly, with real audiences, to truly absorb the experience and be able to express it.

Required Reading

Oullette, Jean-Paul. The New Elements of Standard Screenplay Format. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013.

Suggested Reading

Campbell, Joseph. The Hero With a Thousand Faces, Third Edition, New World Library, 2008.

Goldman, William. Adventures in the Screen Trade. Warner Books, 1983, and Which Lie Did I Tell? Pantheon Books, 2000.

Obst, Linda. Sleepless in Hollywood: Tales From the New Abnormal in the Movie Business. Simon & Schuster, 2013.

Squire, Jason E., editor. The Movie Business Book, Fourth Edition. Routledge/Focal Press, 2017.

Strunk Jr., William. and E. B. White. The Elements of Style, Fourth Edition. Longman Publishers, 2000.

Class Schedule and Assignments

(Dates and topics are subject to change at the discretion of the Instructor.)

1. Thursday, August 29, 2019 Introductions. Formatting.
Cinematic writing vs. prose.
In-class writing exercise:
third person, present tense, 5 lines each.

2. September 5 What is a scene? Descriptive style; economy of
language; creating an environment; visualization.
Due: Assignment # 1
Two descriptive scenes, up to 8 lines each,
no dialogue, same location:
First scene is preparing for a date, second is
after the date. Separately: brief character bios.

3. September 12 Where do ideas come from? Writing journal.
Famous scenes from famous screenplays. The pitch.
Due: Assignment # 2
Generational (with dialogue!)
3 pp. in format; one-line character bios.

4. September 19 Developing your writing style: economy; authority.
Researching and developing real characters.
Due: Assignment # 3
Comedy, 3 pp.
Beginning today, each project includes a pitch.

5. September 26 Dialogue hints and researching dialogue.
Research via eavesdropping.
Due: Assignment #4
An intimate exchange, 3 pp.
Have read a screenplay.
6. October 3 Sequencing; three-act structure. Developing the plot.
Drama is conflict. The main character's goal.
Due: Assignment #5
Creepy, 3 pp.
Have read a stage play.
7. October 10 Keys to visual storytelling.
Know your act breaks and your process.
Due: Assignment #6
First short script, up to 8 pp.,
plus pitch.
8. October 17 Fall Recess
9. October 24 Scenes as dramatic building blocks.
Continue reading first short script.
Have read an independent screenplay.
10. October 31 Keys to rewriting; tension; what's at stake; texture.
Due: Assignment #7
Rewrite of first short script.
11. November 7 Maintaining writing files: generating ideas.
Appearance vs. reality.
Due: Assignment #8
Another comedy, 3 pp.
12. November 14 Reveals; hooks; plants & payoffs.
Who are your favorite screenwriters?
Due: Assignment #9
Second short script, up to 8 pp.
13. November 21 Memorable characters; dialogue moments.
Continue reading second short script.

14. November 28 Happy Thanksgiving!
15. December 5 Launching your career; screenwriting minor.
The writer and the business.
Catch-up assignments.

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/ssa

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**