

University of Southern California  
School of Cinematic Arts  
John Wells Division of Writing for Screen & Television  
Spring, 2020

**CTWR 412: Introduction to Screenwriting**

Thursdays, 4 pm, SCA 203 (19434R, 2 units)

Instructor: Jason E. Squire  
jsquire@usc.edu

**Course Objective:** Welcome to this class, devoted to learning the essential building blocks of the screenplay: 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 professor's SCA 404 mailbox by class time or will result in grade reduction.

**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.

**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.

**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 your 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, creativity and on-time assignments will be evaluated in grading, broken down as follows:

Assignments 1 thru 6 plus 8 and 9: 9% each

First short script: 14%

Second short script: 14%

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 to 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 equate 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 and must miss class, please contact your professor before class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303 (SCA 335).

**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, which you should refer to in order to understand title references that come up in class. The Writing Division also has a fine collection; go to 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.



5. February 13 Dialogue hints and researching dialogue.  
Research via eavesdropping.  
**Due: Assignment #4**  
Seduction, 3 pp.  
Have read a screenplay.
6. February 20 Plot and structure. Keys to visual storytelling.  
Developing your writing style: economy; authority.  
**Due: Assignment #5**  
Creepy, 3 pp.  
Have read a stage play.
7. February 27 Sequencing; three-act structure.  
Know your act breaks and your process.  
**Due: Assignment #6**  
Another comedy, 3 pp.
8. March 5 Scenes as dramatic building blocks.  
Knowing and satisfying your audience.  
**Due: Assignment #7**  
First short script, up to 8 pp.,  
plus pitch.
9. March 12 Keys to rewriting; tension; what's at stake; texture.  
Continue reading first short script.  
Have read an independent screenplay.
10. March 19 Spring Break
11. March 26 Reveals; hooks; plants & payoffs.  
Who are your favorite screenwriters?  
**Due: Assignment #8**  
Rewrite of first short script.
12. April 2 Outlining and structure.  
**Due: Assignment #9**  
An intimate exchange, 3 pp.
13. April 9 No Class Meeting

14. April 16                      Maintaining writing files: generating ideas, characters, dialogue moments, visualization.  
**Due: Assignment #10**  
 Second short script, up to 8 pp.
15. April 23                      Character arcs; story arcs.  
 Continue reading second short script.
16. April 30                      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](http://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](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

#### Support Systems:

**Student Health Counseling Services** - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call  
[engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling](http://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

[suicidpreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidpreventionlifeline.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](http://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](http://equity.usc.edu), [titleix.usc.edu](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://dps.usc.edu), [emergency.usc.edu](http://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](http://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](mailto: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**