

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
Writing Division
CTWR 505: Writing the Short Script
Fall 2020 – (Two Units, Required, Section: 19281)

Instructor: Toni Ann Johnson
Class Schedule: Tuesday, 2:00—4:50 PM
Class Location: Online
Office Hours: By appointment
Contact Information: toniannj@usc.edu

“Your point of view, which is your voice, your person, isn’t something you have to get. It’s something you have to uncover.” – Hanif Kureishi

“I write because I don’t know what I think until I read what I say.” – Flannery O’Connor

“Every story brings us closer to revealing ourselves.”—Sandra Cisneros

*“Directing students should spend a year making films with their typewriters.”
– Alfred Hitchcock*

GOALS OF THIS COURSE:

- Ideation: To develop your cinematic imagination; you will be honing your skills of **observation** as well as studying how **memory** and **experience** can bring originality and brilliance to your characters and stories (with emphasis on your 507/508 scripts.)
- Character: To strengthen & deepen your ability to conceive characters that will lead to compelling stories.
- Voice: To explore and develop your artistic point of view and original cinematic voice. (*Who are your cinematic heroes and why?*)
- Research: To develop ideas for stories and characters through observation of, research into, and direct experience with real life.
- Visualization: To learn to write from a visual and aural perspective.
- Technique: To understand the structure and *economy* of effective screenwriting.

- Dramatic Scene: To develop a fundamental understanding of the dramatic scene.
- Short Scripts: To learn to write effective and moving short scripts (507 & 508.)
- Rewriting: To understand the importance of rewriting.

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.

We will begin with **visualization**, the concept of telling a story with pictures. You will learn to bring the inner life of your characters to the screen without dialogue by using planting and payoff, action and activity, location, props, costume, atmosphere and motivation. We will discover that it is possible (and indeed necessary) to tell your stories visually, to make them compelling and rich with meaning by using these basic techniques.

Later, we will combine these techniques with dialogue in a second stage of exercises designed to teach you the major building block of cinema – the scene. We will expand our work with character and study the ingredients necessary to make any scene work. By exploring our character’s goals, intentions, or “wants” we will discover that the lifeblood of any scene is **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. You will learn to hear your film as you write it, while at the same time you will discover the importance of character as it is explored through situations of conflict. You will also be learning how to be an active member of a “writer’s room.”

During the semester you will be required to workshop your *CTPR P3 script* 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*.

To help you learn format and an expressive, cinematic writing style, I urge you to read as many professional screenplays as possible. You will be required to read and analyze two screenplays provided by the instructor. By the third session I expect your assignments to be written in a professional format -- assignments not meeting that standard will be returned unread. I recommend using Final Draft.

READING LIST:

1. *The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writer’s Guide to the Craft and Elements of a Screenplay*, by David Howard & Edward Mabley (Recommended)
2. *The Anatomy of Story*, by John Truby (Recommended)

3. *The Lost Art of Story*, by Adam Skelter (**Strongly recommended** for this class. Some of the concepts we'll cover are in this book and some of the videos we'll watch are transcribed here.)
4. **Two feature screenplays (provided) - required**

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).
- Assignments turned in late will be marked down.
- **Writing Division Attendance Policy:**
- This class is a workshop and your participation in the discussion is important. Participation includes full involvement in, and contribution to, class discussion, as well as reading (in advance at times; see schedule) the assignments of your colleagues and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.
- Class attendance is mandatory and students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Tardiness is unprofessional and disrespectful to the class. Two late arrivals equals one full absence. Two unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered by a half grade point (Ex. A to A-) Any further unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered another two thirds of a point (ex: B to a C+) for each absence

Excused absences can include, but are not limited to: illness, both physical and mental; death of a loved one; personal emergency; sporting events (for Student-Athletes) or other university-sponsored activities; religious holidays, and so on.

The Online Classroom

Class dynamics are substantially compromised without the ability to see the people in class; therefore, the default is that students have their cameras on during synchronous online sessions. Those facing challenging situations, such as internet connectivity, illness, or home environments that make this difficult or impossible shall contact me to work out accommodations. I encourage you to use virtual backgrounds, and earphones or headsets, should your home environment benefit from these privacies.

Keep yourself muted unless called on. When your camera is on, please dress as you would in the classroom, and behave as you would in a professional environment.

Students are not permitted to create their own class recordings without the instructor's permission. Violations of these policies will be met with the appropriate disciplinary sanction.

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- If you find you must miss class due to personal emergency or personal crisis, please contact your professor as soon as possible so they can assist you in finding the appropriate University care and guidance. Your health and well-being are of utmost importance to the Wells Writing Division and to your Faculty.
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GRADING WEIGHTS:

CTWR 505 grades are based on:

- Homework Assignments (plus FINAL & script analysis.....50%
(16 assignments @ 3.13 points each)
- Reading and Responding to Workshop Assignments.....20%
- 1st 508 Script10%
- Final 508 Script..... 20%

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

PRESENTATION:

As you are preparing to enter the film industry as professionals, your work should be prepared in a professional manner. Screenplay formatting errors, typos, bad spelling or grammar and overall sloppiness are not acceptable.

FORMAT: Scripts must be **typed in 12 pt. Courier**. Please use professional screenwriting software.

- Name every document you email to the group as follows:

Your Name_AssignmentName.Format

Example: Johnson_Triptoschool.pdf

*****Create a TITLE PAGE for each assignment you submit, including title, author name, date and email address.**

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

All work must be emailed to the group by Monday at 10:00 AM. Late submissions will lose points.

Please read your classmates pages in advance. At the start of the semester I will make notes on your pages. As we progress YOU will make notes on each other's pages.

Classroom Decorum

The professor expects all students to respect and support the ideas and writing of their fellow students. Writing is a fragile process and while we should ask questions, analyze and even challenge, we want to remain supportive, always keeping in mind that the screenplay is fragile work in progress. A working writer needs to develop *the art of collaboration* while working with their peers. As a working writer you will need to be able to work constructively with directors, producers and studio executives.

Laptop and Texting Policy

Laptops may be used for note taking, but not for surfing the web unless it is part of a class project. Texting is not allowed during class. Texting is distracting and disruptive. There is nothing that needs to be communicated to anyone except your classmates during class time.

Please save your texting and surfing until class break.

*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 <https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. 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/>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage sarc@usc.edu describes reporting options and other resources.

Support Systems

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu/> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

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

CTWR 505 WEEKLY SCHEDULE

WEEK ONE – MEMORY & story structure

- Introduction. Who I am, who you are; something about yourself.
- Questions for you to ask yourself as you develop as an artist in this class: Where do you come from? Why are you telling the stories you're telling? How do you know who you are?
- Look at a short film script (provided)—for format
- Quick intro to basic 3-Act structure. Plus view “In a Heartbeat” (identify the act breaks)
- Time permitting view short film – “The Future”
- Have you made films already? If so, please consider sharing links with the class.

In class Memory assignment – TRIP TO SCHOOL

- List the places you went to school.
- List how you got to each school. Pick the trip that is **most memorable to you, emotionally.**
- List things, places, activities, people, clothes connected with that trip.
- Now describe ONE trip. Tell us what happened on the way to school.

Homework:

Write one SCENE (two if necessary) *based on your experience* of the most significant “trip to school” memory. **NO MORE THAN 3 Pages, please.** Pick a scene that has significant meaning to you.

What is a scene? It's **one** portion of a story, typically in ONE location, where something takes place that changes the emotional state of the character (See Homework Part 2 for clarity.)

You may make slight changes to the real event, but do try to make the scene emotionally authentic so that it expresses something true to you. 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 by Monday at 10 AM.
We'll read the scenes in class.

Homework PART 2: View this lesson on SCENE DYNAMICS:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3IRGzTuTXI>
(And/or read chapter 5 in *The Lost Art of Story*)

WEEK TWO – Character

1. Read/ Discuss student's trip to school scenes.
2. Review scene dynamics.
3. Discuss CHARACTER and a technique to help you develop characters.
4. Quick review of structure, Acts, character/Conflict
5. Screen a short film (time permitting) "Christmas in Scotland."

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.

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

Third part: One of the characters is now gone, the remaining one has the location to themselves. This should not be a guessing game. 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:

- 1) "Experience" assignment: Choose A or B and write about it.

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

OR

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

Length: 1 page. Prose.

Deliver by Monday at 10:00 AM

Homework Part 2

Watch video: The Poetry of Details:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjY9kf7TuUU>

WEEK THREE – MEMORY STORY

In class:

1. Read/discuss 1 page Memory stories. What do we learn about the “character” discussed? What is the struggle? Does the character change? If so, how? What is driving the character (need)?
2. Discuss Poetry of Details. How might you use details to enhance your own scripts?
3. **In class exercise: PREPARATION FOR A DATE or SIGNIFICANT EVENT**

Designed to build audience engagement and expectations. Introduces the use of props, costume, and character revealing activity and 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.

Pick an interesting character and place them **alone** in a location **significant** to that character. (A home, an office, a combat bunker.)

Scene 1: 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 only what the event *is*, but how the character feels about what's about to happen.

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.

Scene 2: 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.

Homework:

View Ryan Coogler's short film LOCKS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iM9Q61ODjSI>

Write a short film with (NO DIALOGUE) no more than 3-pages, about a character who WANTS something and makes an effort to get it.

Though there's no dialogue, you may use sound. (not voiceover, but sounds that would logically exist in the environment.)

Consider what we've learned about act structure and give the story a beginning, middle, and end. Act 1 introduces us to the protagonist and what they want. Act 2 Something impedes the protagonist as they pursue what they want. Often at the end of Act 2 there's a low point (remember "In a Heatbeat" the boy, alone with ½ a heart). Act 3 The protagonist confronts the thing that impedes them and either succeeds or fails.

Use screenplay format. Write visually: what we SEE on the screen. You may build upon the in-class exercise OR write something new. Save the document as a PDF Include your NAME in the file name. Deliver by Monday at 10:00 AM

2. Read your classmates' work and provide feedback on the PDFs. Attach ALL the PDF's to ONE email and send to the class and to me. NOTES ARE DUE BY THE START OF CLASS

WEEK FOUR - Dialogue and SUBTEXT

- Assign Groups A and B**
- Discuss non-dialogue scripts**
- Discuss subtext. (lesson) What is it? How to create it?**
- Handouts provided**
- Review TIPS for writing dialogue (handout provided)**

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, subtext and 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 their plans, the absolute worst person to appear!

Character A must get rid of character C before they cross 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 10AM

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

View Video on Subtext in Dialogue:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ge0b5EPdL8I>

(Chapter 6 in *The Lost Art of Story*)

WEEK FIVE: Wrongest Person Scenes ~ Brainstorming

- Group everyone.)
- Read and discuss **group B's** scenes first. (Everyone in A should have received written notes from everyone.)
 - View Taika Waititi's Two Cars One Night
 - discuss subtext in dialogue video
 - View Lessons from the Screenplay-American Beauty
 - Discuss "Character Web," from Anatomy of Story (handout provided)

Homework: Brainstorm two ideas for a short film screenplay (that will be **5 pages** or fewer). Limited locations, action that you know you can shoot. Write a paragraph for each idea. The paragraph should give some sense of the genre (comedy/drama/horror, etc.) We should also learn WHO's in the story. WHAT they want. WHERE it takes place. WHEN it takes place. And WHAT happens.

Both groups submit ideas by Monday @ 10:00 AM

Please read the ideas in advance and consider which would work better. (**You're not required to do notes in advance, but you WILL be required to provide feedback in class, so I recommend that you do.**)

Things to consider: Does the main character have a want and a need?

Does the main character undergo some change from beginning to end?

Can the story be told in a visually interesting way?

Will the story lend itself to interesting dialogue?

WEEK SIX

--Students read or pitch their ideas to the class. Together we decide which to choose.

--Brief Lesson on how to execute Montage in scripts

--Review Subtext

--Discuss how to do an outline.

--View short film "Spider" What does the character WANT? What does he NEED?

Homework: Write an outline of scenes in three acts for your chosen short film idea.

Both groups deliver your outlines Monday by 10:00 AM.

Everyone (both groups) Make written notes on GROUP B's outlines.

WEEK SEVEN –

508 Faculty visit~coordinator Pablo Frasconi
pfrasconi@cinema.usc.edu

--read and discuss group A's outlines *first*.

(Everyone in Group B should have received *written* notes.)

--discuss cinematic tension. What IS it? How do we create it in scenes?

- discuss clips/scenes that dramatize cinematic tension
- discuss Setups and Payoffs (pg. 72 in *The Tools of Screenwriting, Planting and Payoff*)
- In class exercise:

“SIGNIFICANT OBJECT” Dialogue scene. 3 – 5 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, etc. Hitchcock: A leg of lamb for dinner is used as murder weapon.)

Things to consider: How is atmosphere created via props/objects?
 How does behavior/activity define character and character objective?
 How is conflict created between clash of character desires?

Homework:

Write the first draft of your short script.

Everyone (Both Groups) submit their first draft by Monday @10:00AM

Everyone makes notes on GROUP A’s Scripts. Notes are due by the start of class.

Part 2: Read feature script BRIDESMAIDS – provided.

Answer the questions emailed to you.

Due in 2 weeks—week Nine

WEEK EIGHT -- Short scripts.

--Workshop Group B’s scripts FIRST, Group A should have received written notes.

--Discuss Dialogue Scene – SIGNIFICANT OBJECT—from in-class last week.

--Discuss Reversal of Expectation – the audience will try to guess what happens next in your story, but you don’t want them to guess correctly.

Discuss ways to make the audience think one thing is going to happen but you deliver something else.

HOMEWORK: Revise your short script. Everyone submit revised script Monday by 10:00 Am

Everyone make **WRITTEN** notes on Group B's scripts. Notes are due by the start of class.

FINISH YOUR BRIDESMAIDS assignment. It's due by the start of class on Tuesday.)

WEEK NINE -- Workshop group A's Revised scripts first

Group B should have received written notes.

--Discuss Bridesmaids

---Short lesson on Beginnings and Endings

--View Opening and Closing shots of films

--Time permitting view short film/s

In Class Exercise: Write a two-character "SEDUCTION" dialogue scene.

3 -5 pgs.

"Seduction" scene. Two possible scenarios. Choose 1.

- 1) Character A is trying to seduce or persuade Character B to do something, but Character B doesn't want to. Character A either succeeds or fails.
- 2) Both Characters A & B want to be seduced/do the thing in question, but circumstances make it almost impossible to succeed. They either succeed or fail.

[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.]

Homework: Develop 2 ideas for your 508 5-page script.

Write a paragraph for each. Write these paragraphs in an entertaining way to prepare to PITCH the ideas in class next

week. In addition to submitting your ideas your homework is to practice these pitches. You CAN simply read them in class, OR you can TELL us the story as if you were telling a friend what your movie is about. Submit the idea by Monday at 10:00 AM, however NO NOTES ARE DUE. You'll present the ideas in class.

View Video on CHARACTER and THEME
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GngPKwCDeTU>
 (Chapter 4 in *The Lost Art of Story*)

WEEK TEN : Pitches – and Character work

- Students pitch, discuss pitches, pick one.
- Discuss Character and Theme (from Lost Art of Story)
- Consider what about your protagonist intrigues you. Why do you want to write about this person? Is there something about them that you are curious about? Or that you relate to? What is it?
- In class exercise on CHARACTER. Write a bio of the protagonist for the story you've chosen. (Handout provided.)

HOMEWORK: Refine your chosen story idea and write an outline of scenes. Deliver your outline by Monday at 10:00 AM

Everyone make written notes on all outlines.

WEEK ELEVEN: Workshop Outlines -THEME and MOTIF

- Workshop/Discuss ALL outlines
- What is a motif? How can we use it in script?
- View video lesson on Theme and Motif.
- View/discuss short film/s

Homework: Both groups write the first draft of your 508 script. Everyone deliver your script by Monday at 10:00AM
 Make notes on Group A's scripts.

View these videos on story structure:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=amW7864Lcn4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Zmv3EQIA7g>

Part 2

DUE in 2 weeks, last class:

Read *QUEEN and SLIM* (provided)

Answer the questions emailed to you.

WEEK TWELVE: 508 Script

- Read group B's scripts *first* (A's should have received notes)
- View Lessons from the Screenplay: *Searching* (variation on script format.
- View short film/s

Homework: Revise script

Deliver by Monday at 10:00AM

Complete Queen and Slim assignment—due by next class

Make NOTES on group B's Scripts

WEEK THIRTEEN -- THE 508 SHORT SCRIPT

- Read all scripts-- group A's scripts first (B's should have received notes.)
- View/discuss short film/s

508 script due to Production producing faculty TBA

WEEK FOURTEEN – Study Day – no class.

FINALS WEEK: SUMMARY PROJECT TO INSTRUCTOR AND CLASSMATE [SUMMARY PROJECT = Analyze and write up strengths and weaknesses of each 508 script. (including your own) One page per project.]

EMAIL EXAM / SUMMARY PROJECT TO INSTRUCTOR AND CLASSMATES