

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

**CTWR 409: Fundamentals of Screenwriting: Character, Conflict and Story**

Thursdays, 4 pm via Zoom (19402R, 4 units)

Professor: Jason E. Squire

**Course Description:** Welcome to this class, an introduction to writing compelling scenes, creating authentic characters, three-act structure and feature film outlining. Emphasis will be on visualization, dialogue, creating conflict-driven scenes, plot (goals plus obstacles), three-act structure and sequencing.

**Course Objectives:** You will be challenged to flex and focus your powers of invention and expression as you become comfortable writing descriptive scenes, then progress to conceiving and outlining the feature-length screenplay, then write Act One.

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, jargon and more.

When instruction pivots to creating the feature, work will involve your creative intentions and instincts based on your own media viewing, while taking into account audience expectations.

**Guidelines:** Emphasis is on careful writing, analyzed under the open scrutiny of your peers. Assignments will go through the workshop format 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.

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 returned the following week, along with that current week's assignment.

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

Every week, the assignments due must be received by the professor by 10am on class day in Word or PDF. If absent, the assignment due must be received by class time. Missing any of these deadlines will have a negative impact on your grade.

**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 group 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.

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

Assignments 1 thru 7: 10% each = 70%  
 Assignments 8 and 9: 30% total = 30%

**Writing Division Attendance Policy:** Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. On the third absence, students will have their final grade lowered by 10% and an additional 10% for each absence thereafter. Two late arrivals equates to one full absence. Note: This is a change in policy. Instructors will no longer distinguish between an excused or unexcused absence. An absence will be an 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.

**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. For example, [screenplayed.com](http://screenplayed.com) compares pages to the finished film. The Writing Division also has a fine collection; when restrictions are lifted, visit SCA 335 for details.

Continue to read literature and short stories on your own. And watch movies or any creative content endlessly, 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 20, 2020      Introductions. Formatting.  
Cinematic writing vs. prose.  
In-class writing exercise:  
third person, present tense, 5 lines each.
  
2. August 27                      What is a conflict-driven scene? Descriptive style; economy  
of language; creating an environment; visualization.  
**Due: Assignment # 1**  
**Generational.**  
Separately: brief character bios.
  
3. September 3                    Where do ideas come from? Writing journal.  
Developing your writing style: economy; authority.  
The pitch. Twists and surprises.  
**Due: Assignment # 2**  
**Comedy.**

4. September 10  
 Researching and developing real characters.  
 Understanding plot: goals and obstacles.  
**Due: Assignment #3**  
**Creepy.**  
 Beginning today, each project includes a pitch.
5. September 17  
 Dialogue hints and researching dialogue via eavesdropping; memorable real-life characters.  
**Due: Assignment #4**  
**An intimate exchange in the world of Covid-19.**  
 Have read a screenplay.
6. September 24  
 Sequencing; three-act structure. Developing the plot.  
 The main character's goal; second-act complications.  
 Drama is conflict.  
**Due: Assignment #5**  
**Scene with a plant and payoff.**  
 Have read a stage play.
7. October 1  
 Plot boils down to goals and obstructions.  
 Every beat should move the story forward.  
**Due: Assignment #6**  
**Three feature stories with act breaks plus pitch.**
8. October 8  
 Scenes as dramatic building blocks.  
 Have read an independent screenplay.  
**Due: Assignment #7**  
**Outline: numbered beats with act breaks.**
9. October 15  
 Keys to rewriting; tension; what's at stake; texture.  
 Review your act breaks and your process.  
**Due: Assignment #8**  
**First half of Act One.**
10. October 22  
 Maintaining writing files: generating ideas.  
 Appearance vs. reality. Audience expectations.  
 Continue reading first half of Act One.

11. October 29                      Reveals; hooks; plants & payoffs.  
Who are your favorite screenwriters?  
**Due: Assignment #9**  
**Second half of Act One.**
12. November 5                      Planning your future writing; different genres and  
formats; how to be productive.  
Continue reading second half of Act One.
13. November 12                      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  
[suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://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](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.