

School of Cinematic Arts
The John Wells Division of Writing for
Screen and Television

CTWR 206A: Writing the Screenplay
Fall 2020
Section (#19429)

Instructor: Toni Ann Johnson
Class Schedule: Fridays 1:00PM—3:50pm
Class Location: online
Office Hours: After class, or by appointment
Contact Information: toniannj@usc.edu

Course Objective:

- Learn three-act story structure.
- Learn to develop fully dimensional characters.
- Gain an understanding of several aspects of screenwriting.
- Cultivate your unique voice.
- Write a feature length screenplay outline.

Course Description:

A screenplay has a limited number of pages in which to tell a complete story. As screenwriters we must make each scene count. Everything a screenwriter chooses to include is ideally revealing character and/or moving the story forward.

Creating an outline allows the writer to plan the story and get a sense of what works and what doesn't before executing a full draft. A well thought out, detailed outline will conquer the bulk of the work so the writer can flesh out the draft more easily and with confidence.

In this course, through brief lectures, viewing films & clips, video essays, reading scripts like a writer, and by writing and critiquing, you'll deepen your understanding of the elements that make a screenplay work. You'll also develop a detailed three-act outline for a feature script..

Homework and Notes:

You'll be developing your material over the course of the class and homework will include writing assignments that build toward your completed outline.

We'll be workshopping pages in class. You'll email your assignments to your classmates and to the instructor at least **two days prior to class, no later than Wednesdays by 10AM**. Send the work as a PDF **with your last name at the beginning of the file name**. For example: Johnson_title of script

Notes/Critiques—you'll be reading and critiquing classmates work. You may make comments on specific lines within the document using the "notes" function (text box) or write the notes directly on the page.

At the end of the document provide feedback via these general guidelines:

1. What's working in the piece?
2. What could work better?
3. Suggestions for revision.

Focus on areas you identified as needing improvement. These notes don't have to be extensive. "I don't like this," is not an acceptable critique. If you don't think something works, please explain why and offer suggestions for revision. When you write a critique, consider the substantive elements in the script. For example, is the character arc working? Is the theme coming across? Is the tone appropriate?

Everyone will comment on all scripts in workshop, so you will need to read them.

Please give constructive feedback and please be considerate. This is a learning environment. Work can be rewritten. We're here to learn and improve. Let's cultivate an atmosphere of support.

NOTES are due via email by the start of class. Please send a single email to the entire class with the PDFs (that include your notes) for all students attached (also send to your instructor). Please do not send individual emails to each person. This will be ONE email thread. You will reply to whomever begins the thread. The subject line of the notes thread should say NOTES.

Course Reading:

The Lost Art of Story, by Adam Skelter (Available on Amazon in paperback)

This book contains transcripts of video lectures we'll watch and discuss.

Handouts--provided

Devil in a Blue Dress, screenplay (first 30 pages) by Carl Franklin, based on the novel by Walter Mosely. **(Provided) Posted on Blackboard..**

Screenplay – *Bridesmaids* by Annie Mumalo & Kristen Wiig. (provided on Blackboard)

In addition to these, you'll read two feature length screenplays of your choice from films that have been produced. *Pick scripts from films you're interested in and that are the genre or genres you want to write in. PLEASE RUN YOUR CHOICES BY ME FIRST— Thank you!*

You'll be reading the two scripts and answering a set of questions designed to help you read scripts like a writer and to understand the way they're put together. Instructions for this assignment will be provided.

1. Due: Friday, October 2nd.
2. Due: Friday, November 6th

RECOMMENDED READING: *The Anatomy of Story* by John Truby

I'll be providing handouts based on ideas in this book. Some of the videos we'll see reference this book. I highly recommend that you get a copy to read and refer to.

Grading Criteria:

In class participation:	10%
Homework:	30%
(11 @ 2.73 points each)	
Written notes	10%
Two Reading assignments	10%
2 @5 points each	
Final outline/ pages:	40%

	100%

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

Expectation of Professionalism:

All material is expected to be turned in on time. Assignments will be penalized for grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, and typos. Please proof your assignment prior to submission.

Internet Policy:

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the internet.

Recording Devices:

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

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:

No texting or talking on cell phones, please.

Laptops may be used for taking notes, for workshop, and when approved for specific assignments. No internet surfing or texting during class, please. Points may be deducted from your final grade if you violate this policy.

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. 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.

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.

Class Schedule:

Week 1 8/21: --Introduction—who I am. Who you are, and the kind of story you'd like to develop. Collect student info.
 --Go over syllabus; Discuss goals of class.
 --Discuss screenplay software (Final Draft recommended)
 --Hand out instructions for reading assignments.
 1st due: Oct. 2nd. 2nd due: November 6th

- Ideas. What makes an idea work for a screenplay?
Discuss character want/need/Weakness
- Lessons from the Screenplay Shaun of the Dead
- Truby's advice for generating story ideas (provided)
- Brief introduction to three-act structure.
- Discuss beats of Act I in more depth. Handout provided.

Homework: Develop two ideas for screenplays. The ideas should be about characters that truly interest you. Create characters that no one else would create in the same way, because no other writer has your unique perspective. Consider what the character wants (overall goal) and what he/she needs (the thing that must change in order for the character to grow).

Write a paragraph synopsis for each idea. Be concise. Each paragraph can be half a page or less. Give the ideas a beginning, middle and end. Tell us who the main character is, and what he or she wants and needs. What's opposing him/her? Briefly describe what the character goes through to get what they WANT. And describe what change the character has undergone by the end, which fulfills the NEED. If the character does *not* change, then we (the audience) must understand something in a deeper or new way as a result. What does the audience learn in this case? We'll discuss these in class.

Remember: Email your story ideas to the class and instructor by 10am Wednesday, August 26th. Make notes on your classmates' ideas. (What's working? What could work better? What suggestions do you have to strengthen your colleagues' ideas.)

Notes are due at the beginning of class.

- Week 2 8/28:**
- Discuss students story ideas. Pick one to develop.
 - Discuss CREATING A CHARACTER; Questions for the writer to ask when developing a character. Handout provided.
 - In class exercise on character (provided)
 - Review act structure, review beats of Act I and discuss beats of Act II up to Midpoint. Handout provided.
 - Lessons from the screenplay American Beauty (**character web**)
 - Share Truby's document: Character Web

Homework: Revise and expand your chosen idea. Give it a character arc in three acts. Send to me and to your classmates.

Email to me and to the class by Wednesday @ 10AM. If you're able to send it earlier that will be appreciated!

NOTES are due by the start of class.

Week 3 9/4

- Workshop story ideas.
- Review act structure, and beats of Act II midpoint to end of Act II.
Handout provided.
- Look at Truby's **Seven Steps** to screenplay structure

- Discuss Want/Need/Desire
- review Lessons from the Screenplay Shaun of the Dead
- Discuss **Story World** (document provided)

Homework Part 1: Read Chapters 1&2 in *The Lost Art of Story*

Homework Part II:

Simple Beat Sheet.

For your screenplay idea answer the following:

1. How do you introduce your main character? (Describe the scene.)
2. What is the inciting incident?
3. What is the first act break? (When the character decides to engage.)
4. What is the mid-point of your second act?
5. What is the end of your second act? (Typically the low point, unless it's a tragedy then the end of act 2 can be an upbeat event.)
6. What is your climax? (When the protagonist confronts the main impediment.)
7. What is your resolution?

Email this by Wednesday @10AM

- Week 4** 9/11:
- Workshop student beat sheets.
 - Discuss Outlines. What's in them? What's the format?
 - Look at article on screenplay outline/example (How to Outline your screenplay.)
 - Brief review of Act structure. What happens in Acts I & II
 - Discuss beats of Act III. Handout provided.
 - View Video lecture on Story Structure (Anatomy of Chaos) Part 1 (Handout provided of Anatomy of Chaos Story Outline diagram.)

Homework: **Write Act I** of your outline. Use screenplay software. Use scene headings. Include all the scenes and write any dialogue you wish to include in prose form, using quotation marks, as in a short story or novel OR feel free to go ahead and execute bits of dialogue in screenplay format if you wish. (Not required.) Write the story in the PRESENT tense—as it would unfold on screen. Don't explain the story, show it. Everything should be visual. Your outline should show us your movie, (bring it to life on the page). It's not an explanation of the movie. Make sure we understand what takes place in each scene and how it builds to the next. Be mindful of what the characters want within the scenes. Characters should have an objective in each scene.

Email to the whole class and your instructor 2 days prior to next class (by Wednesday at 10AM). Everyone read ACT 1 submissions. NOTES are due by the start of class.

- Week 5** 9/18:
- Workshop students' Act I.
 - Divide into Groups A & B
 - View Anatomy of Chaos Story Structure Part 2
 - Review act structure Act 2
 - Discuss Beginnings and Endings/

--View opening and closing shots + article on knowing your ending first

Homework: **Group A revise Act 1 as needed and write the first half of Act 2 to midpoint** of your outline (Mark changes either in bold or highlight) Deliver by Wednesday at 10AM. Everyone read Group A's pages and make notes. Notes are due by the start of class.

Homework part II: Read the first thirty pages of *Devil in a Blue Dress* (provided) Pay attention to the description—the action lines and paragraphs—and notice the voice they're written in. **Copy two action lines or paragraphs that work well, or are interesting in some way and bring to share in class.**

Think about the voice you write your own action/description in. Your action lines can be plain and simply describe what happens. They can also have a perspective and even a personality if you want them to. Having fun with writing your screen description isn't mandatory, but it can make your script a more entertaining read.

Week 6: 9/25

--Workshop outlines up to Act II midpoint (Group A)
 --Discuss *Devil in a Blue Dress* description
 Discuss other examples
 --What is reversal of expectation?
 --View film clip example (*Liar Liar*).
 --Lessons from the screenplay *Good Will Hunting* (**Character wound**)

***Reminder: Your first reading assignment is due next week, 10/02. Email to your instructor by the beginning of class.**

Homework Part 1: Finish 1st reading assignment.

Part 2: Group B, revise Act I of your outline (mark changes either in bold or using track changes) and write first half of Act II of your outline up to the midpoint. Deliver by Wednesday at 10AM.

Everyone make notes on Group B's pages. Deliver notes via email by start of class on 10/2.

Please bring *The Lost Art of Story* to class next week.

Week 7 10/2:

--Halfway point/Midterm evals
 --Reading assignments delivered (late assignments lose points)
 --Workshop outline, up to Act II midpoint (Groups, B)
 --Discuss **theme**. What are some ways a writer expresses the theme of a story? Look at Theme and Motif.
 --Read Chapter 4 of *The Lost Art of Story*, essay on Character and Theme
 --View Character and Theme video

Homework: **Group A, revise Act I and the first half of Act II of your outline as needed, mark changes (in bold or highlight) and continue writing your outline to the end of ACT II.** Deliver by Wednesday at 10AM. Everyone read Group A's pages and make notes. Notes are due by the start of class.

Week 8 10/09

- Workshop outlines to the end of Act II (Group A)
- View and Talk about The Lunch Date in terms of the visual writing and thematic ideas. How did you feel at the end of the film?
- What are setups and payoffs?
- Look at scene dynamics chapter *Lost Art of Story*
- discuss SCENE DYNAMICS view video (plus handout provided)

Homework Part 1 : Watch Bend It Like Beckham. (Available to stream on Amazon.) Answer: 1. Who is the main character? 2. What does the main character want? 3. What does the main character *need*? 4. What are the act breaks? (End of Act 1/ End of Act 2) 5. How is the protagonist different by the end: External Change? Internal Change?

Email to your instructor by the start of next class. (Does not need to be shared with classmates.)

Homework Part II: **Group B revise outline up to midpoint as needed, mark changes in bold and continue your outline up to the end of Act II.** Deliver by Wednesday at 10AM. Everyone read group B's pages and make notes. Notes are due by the start of class.

Week 9 10/16:

- Workshop outlines to the end of Act II (Group B)
- Review beats of Act III
- Discuss Bend it Like Beckham.
- What is "self revelation?" (Truby's example)
- Discuss **Climax and resolution** –look at Anatomy of chaos diagram AND Truby's 7-steps and Michael Hauge video

Homework: Group A, revise Act I and Act II of your outline as needed and continue on to the end of Act III. Mark changes. Deliver by Wednesday at 10AM. Everyone read Group A's pages and make notes. Notes are due by the start of class.

Week 10 10/23:

- Workshop revised Acts I & II & Act III outlines (Group A)
- Tips on Dialogue (handouts provided)
- Lessons from the Screenplay *Gone Girl*

Homework: Group B, make any revisions necessary on Act I and Act II of your outline. Mark changes. And write Act III. Deliver by Wednesday @10 AM. Everyone read Group B's submissions and make notes, deliver notes by the start of class.
Homework Part II: Read Chapter six in *The Lost Art of Story*, chapter on Dialogue.

Week 11 10/30: --***Reading assignments reminder**; due next week
late assignments lose points.
--Workshop revised acts I & II and new pages Act III of outline (Group B)
--Read Anatomy of Chaos chapter on Dialogue
-- View Anatomy of Chaos Subtext in Dialogue

Homework: Group A revise and or polish Act I, II & III.
Deliver by Wednesday at 10AM.
Everyone read Group A's submissions and make notes. Notes are due by the start of class.

***Reminder: Your second reading assignment is due next week, 11/06. Email it to your instructor by the start of class.**

Week 12 11/06:
--Students Deliver reading assignment # 2
--Workshop revised outline (Group A).
--View Anatomy of Chaos, Aristotle was wrong
--Discuss the MORAL ARGUMENT (Truby lecture— move to next week if necessary.)

Homework Part I: Read *Bridesmaids* by Annie Mumalo and Kristen Wiig. Pay attention to dialogue and subtext. **Copy one scene of dialogue that you think works well and write down what you think works about it.** Email this to your instructor and be prepared to share and discuss in class.

Homework Part II: Group B, revise Act I & II & III as needed, mark changes.
Deliver by Wednesday, November 11th @ 10 AM.
Notes due by the start of class.

Week 13 11/13:
--Workshop revised outline (Group B)
--Discuss Bridesmaids
--go over anything we didn't get to cover or things students would like more information on
--possibly invite industry guest speaker
Final class – Send off

FINALS WEEK – All work due – Last chance to submit your FINAL outline for your grade. Please submit by Nov. 20th.

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 outline 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.

<p>PLEASE NOTE: FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX</p>
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