
USC SCHOOL OF
CINEMATIC ARTS

CTWR 413: Writing the Short Script 1
FALL 2020 SYLLABUS (2 Units)

Instructor: Robert Ramsey

Section: 19448D

Class Time: Wednesdays 10-12:50 p.m. PST on Zoom.

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Office Hours: By appointment

GOALS OF THIS COURSE:

- Introduction to the craft of screenwriting.
- To learn and practice the elements of a “Good story well told.”
- To strengthen & deepen your ability to conceive compelling ideas, characters and stories through experience and observation.
- To learn to write from a visual and aural perspective.
- To learn narrative structure
- To learn the building blocks of the dramatic scene.
- To write a short script.

This is an introductory course in writing for the screen in which you will learn and develop your craft as a storyteller. You will learn to draw on your memories, experiences, observation and of course imagination to create compelling characters and stories for the screen.

This is a workshop class. Together we will read and critique a series of weekly assignments, both in and outside the class, designed to help you understand the fundamentals of screenwriting. You will learn to bring your visual and aural senses to your writing, to see and hear your film as you write it, developing and exploring your characters through situations of conflict.

At the end of the class you will apply your skills to writing TWO SHORT NARRATIVE CTPR 310 SCRIPTS.

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READING:

You should read as many screenplays as possible to familiarize yourself with the styles and form of other professional writers. You will be assigned some scripts to read on your own time and be prepared to discuss them in class. Additionally the following books are highly suggested:

"The Tools of Screenwriting" by Howard & Mabley.

"Creative Filmmaking From the Inside Out" by Dannenbaum, Hodge, Mayer.

GRADING:

In-class exercises 30%

Assignments 60%

Participation 10%

Class participation includes full involvement in and contribution to all class discussions, as well as reading (in advance at times; see schedule above) the assignments of the other students and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.

Per the 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%

A : Work of **excellent** quality. Outstanding application of the dramatic principles and fulfillment of course requirements and deadlines as specified in the syllabus.

B : Work of **good** quality. Above average fulfillments of course requirements and deadlines.

C : Work of **fair** quality. Minimum fulfillment of course requirements and deadlines for passing graduate credit.

C-: FAIL to meet minimum grade for credit. NON PASSING GRADE.

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.

OFFICE HOURS: By appointment.

ASSIGNMENTS & SCHEDULE

WEEK ONE (Aug. 19) – ATMOSPHERE & VISUALIZATION

In class assignment – TRIP TO SCHOOL

Creating a sense of place and atmospheric locations is part of the writer’s job.

Lighting, time of day, weather, architecture, use of sound, props and objects all help create mood and the world of your story.

- List the places you went to school starting as far back as you can remember.
- List how you got to each school. Pick the hottest place/trip emotionally.
- List things, places, activities, people, clothes connected with that trip.
- Now describe one trip, tell us about how you got to school (more “telling,” less “reading”).

WEEK TWO (Aug. 26): ROOMMATES

Roommates. Non-dialogue. Designed to introduce characters through visuals and props -- and conflict -- without 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 his or herself. 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.*

WEEK THREE (Sept. 2): PREPARATION FOR A DATE or SIGNIFICANT EVENT

Also 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.

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Length: No more than a page total.

*Pick an interesting character and place him or her **alone** in a location **significant** to that character. (A home, an office, a combat bunker.) 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. This should not be a guessing game. 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. 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.*

WEEK FOUR (Sept. 9): Dialogue Scene – “WRONGEST” PERSON / INTRUDER

The "Wrongest" Person. A dialogue scene between **two** characters. Should build and employ many of elements already introduced (especially “Preparation for a Date”). Preparation, planting and pay-off, etc. (For some reason, writers tend to forget the simplest elements, like sound and light to help the audience expect a romantic or violent scene...) Designed to reveal character through conflict, to build suspense through cross-cutting and a ticking clock, and to practice dialogue -- including attitude, vernacular/voice, scene/plot advertising, exposition.

Length: As long as it needs to be, but hopefully not more than 3 or 4 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 his/her plans, the absolute worst person to appear. Character A must get rid of character C before he/she crosses 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.

[CTPR 310 TEACHERS WILL VISIT FOR 20 MINTUTES DURING WEEK 6 TO DESCRIBE PARAMETERS OF THE CLASS.]

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WEEK FIVE (Sept. 16): Dialogue Scene – SEDUCTION / PERSUASION

The goal of this scene is to explore characters – their past and present relationships. This is a good scene to introduce the concept of exposition through conflict.

Length: 3 or 4 pages.

One character wants another character to do something. The seducer should know which "buttons" to push. 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. The scene ends when the seducee agrees or doesn't.

Assignment for Week 6: Prepare 3 ideas to pitch in class as **5 page maximum** CTPR 310 scripts. Pitch should be a couple of sentences.

Students should consider the production limitations of the 310 project; limiting the number of locations, physical complexity of action, use of minors, etc.

WEEK SIX (Sept. 23): - PITCHING 310 IDEAS.

Assignment for Week 7: Refine and expand pitches.

[CTPR 310 FACULTY VISIT TO 413]

WEEK SEVEN (Sept. 30): – PITCHING 310 IDEAS.

Assignment for Week 8: First draft of 310 script #1.

WEEK EIGHT (Oct. 7): REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #1

Assignment: Revise 310 script #1.

WEEK NINE (Oct. 14): REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #1

Assignment: Write first draft of 310 script #2.

WEEK TEN (Oct. 21): REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #2

Assignment: Revise 310 script #2.

WEEK ELEVEN (Oct. 28): REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #2

Students select one of the two revised scripts to pursue further.

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Assignment: Rewrite selected 310 script.

WEEK TWELVE (Nov. 4): REVIEW & WORKSHOP REWRITTEN 310 SCRIPT.

Assignment: Revise rewritten selected 310 script.

WEEK THIRTEEN (Nov. 11): REVIEW REVISIONS. LAST CLASS PERIOD.

Assignment: Final polishes of selected 310 script.

WEEK FIFTEEN: EXAM/SUMMARY PROJECT. VIA EMAIL. NO CLASS.

Assignment: As your summary project, write up notes for everyone's final project, including your own. Deliver these notes to your colleagues and instructor via email.

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 Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* <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.

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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/academicssupport/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.