

---

## USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS

### *CTWR 413: Writing the Short Script 1* SPRING 2021 SYLLABUS (2 Units)

Instructor: LaMont Ferrell  
Email: lamontfe@usc.edu  
Section: # 19180

Class meets: Wed 7PM - 9:50PM-PST  
Location: Online  
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 screenplay

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 a short narrative *6 page CTPR 310 script*.

#### WORKSHOP FOCUS:

- **CHARACTER WORK:** To strengthen & deepen your ability to conceive characters and ideas that will lead to compelling stories.

- **IDEATION:** To facilitate the development of artistic technique and cinematic imagination.
- **OBSERVATION:** To develop ideas for stories and characters through observation of, research into, and direct experience with and from real life.
- **PERCEPTION:** To learn to write from a visual and aural perspective.
- **TECHNIQUE:** To understand the structure and economy of effective narrative screenwriting.
- **CRAFT:** To develop a fundamental understanding of the dramatic scene.
- **VOICE:** To explore and develop your artistic point of view and original cinematic voice.
- **COHESION:** To learn to write the short script. (CTPR 310)
- **DISCIPLINE:** To understand the importance of rewriting.

Screenwriting format is not an exact science; within accepted parameters, you should develop a format style that you find both comfortable and expressive.

You will need professional script software for this class. I recommend using **Final Draft**. If you don't own the software, you can download a free demo version—with watermark—from the Final Draft website (<https://www.finaldraft.com>). You may use this demo version to do all your assignments.

### **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

*"Writing is Rewriting"* by Jack Epps

### **SUBMITTING WORK:**

Each week you will post your work as a PDF to Blackboard 2 ways:

1. Week's Discussion Forum
2. To the Assignments Sight

Please post your work only in Blackboard. **DO NOT EMAIL ME YOUR WORK.**

Scripts must show strict adherence to proper screenplay format and be grammatically correct and free from spelling errors. If scripts are submitted and not conforming to these guidelines points will be deducted.

## **GRADING:**

### **GRADING WEIGHTS:**

CTWR 413 grades are based upon:

**Participation: 10%**

**Weekly assignments: 60%**

**Final Script: 30%**

### **ASSIGNMENTS - WEIGHTS:**

- trip to school: 2.6%
- pivotal person: 2.6%
- assigned script: 5%
- roommates: 2.6%
- preparation for a date: 2.6%
- fan fiction 2.6%
- wrongest person: 2.6%
- seduction/persuasion: 2.6%
- pitch 3 ideas: 2.6%
- choose #1/ emotional beats: 2.6%
- 1st draft of #1: 5%
- Choose #2/emotional beats: 2.6%
- 2<sup>nd</sup> draft of #1 2.6%
- 1st draft of #2: 5%
- Choose final/emotional beats: 2.6%
- 2<sup>nd</sup> draft of #2: 2.6%
- 310 swapped: 2.6%
- First draft of final 8.6%

FINAL CTPR 310 SCRIPT: 30%

**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.**

**Class attendance is mandatory, and includes being on time to class (otherwise, the students who present their material first are short-changed).**

**You are allowed one unexcused absence (documentation required for excused absences). Beyond one, you will receive a reduction of one-third letter grade for each unexcused absence. (e.g., A- down to B+, B down to B-)**

**Tardiness is unprofessional, and unacceptable. You will be allowed no more than one unexcused tardiness. Further tardiness will result in one-sixth letter grade for each occurrence. (e.g., A- down to B+, B down to B-)**

**Late assignments will result in a lower grade.**

**All work must be delivered in proper format and emailed to the instructor and all classmates by 5 pm on the Monday before the Wednesday class.**

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.**

#### **COMPUTER USE:**

Laptops and tablets may be used in class for class related matters. Their use beyond class related matters can result in loss of the privilege to use them.

**OFFICE HOURS:** By appointment.

### **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](mailto: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.htm](http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.htm) 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.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>PLEASE NOTE: FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX</b></p>
---

## **ASSIGNMENTS & SCHEDULE**

Please note that all dates are subject to change at the discretion of the professor

**(1/27)**

### **WEEK ONE – ATMOSPHERE & VISUALIZATION**

Expectations.

*Ideation* - how to think. What is a short script? What are you going to write?

#### **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.
- List things, places, activities, people, clothes connected with that trip and then pick the most memorable and emotional one.
- Now describe one trip, tell us about how you got to school in detail. Paint a picture. (Your description can be bullet-pointed as you will be asked to tell the class about the trip rather than reading. (More “telling”, less “reading”.)

**HW: PIVOTAL PERSON** - biggest influence - *antagonist*

Describe in detail an event in your life where someone "pushed your buttons" and made you react to their intent in a completely unexpected way; someone who changed you in a moment and made you see yourself or the world differently. Writing from an emotional place. (2-6 pages max) Be prepared to read and discuss next class period.

**(2/3)**

### **WEEK TWO: ROOMMATES**

Discuss the HW, then we will learn:

HOW TO WRITE IN SCREENPLAY FORMAT - for those who don't know... followed by

**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.*

**(2/10)**

### **WEEK THREE: 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.

*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. in (3-5 pages)*

**(2/17)**

### **WEEK FOUR: FAN FICTION**

Choose a produced screenplay or tv pilot from the last 5 years. Watch the film or show and read the script, paying special attention to the way it was written (format and style – what was on the page that reached the screen? Find a place in the middle of the script and continue the story in a different direction, using the original characters and mimicking the writer's style, for three or four scenes (2-5 pages).

(2/24)

### **WEEK FIVE: 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.*

(3/3)

### **WEEK SIX: 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 7:** Prepare 3 ideas to pitch in class as 6 minute 310 scripts.



(3/10)

**WEEK SEVEN: - PITCHING 310 IDEAS.**

**HW Assignment for Week 8:** Refine Pitches.

(3/17)

**WEEK EIGHT: - PITCHING 310 IDEAS.**

**HW Assignment for Week 9:** First draft of 310 script #1.

(3/24)

**WEEK NINE: REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #1**

**HW Assignment:** Revise 310 script #1

(3/31)

**WEEK TEN: REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #1**

**HW Assignment:** Write first draft of 310 script #2.

(4/7)

**WELLNESS DAY - (NO CLASSES)**

(TBD)

**WEEK ELEVEN: REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #2**

**HW Assignment:** Revise 310 script #2.

(4/14)

**WEEK TWELVE: REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #2**

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

**HW Assignment:** Rewrite selected 310 script.

**HW Assignment** 310 swapped - you will re-write someone else's short and they will re-write yours. Get used to it.

(4/21)

**WEEK THIRTEEN: REVIEW & WORKSHOP REWRITTEN 310 SCRIPT.**

Discuss final revisions, selected 310 script.

*Review screenwriting concepts, final discussion of short scripts.*

(4/28)

**WEEK FOURTEEN: REVIEW REVISIONS FINAL WEEK.**

Table reads of final 310 scripts

**HW Assignment:** Final polishes of selected 310 script. Final Script is due to both professor and CTPR 310 faculty by **May 12**.

