

CTWR 533b – WRITING THE FEATURE SCRIPT **COURSE SYLLABUS**

CLASS: CTWR 533B – WRITING THE FEATURE SCRIPT (19284D)

PREREQ's: 533A

TIME/LOC.: Mondays from 10am to 12:50pm via Zoom

INSTRUCTOR: Peter Gamble Robinson

OFFICE HOURS: After class, or by appointment.

PHONE: 213-925-8880 (Between 9:00am and 9pm)

EMAIL: pgrobins@usc.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In film school we spend many classes writing first drafts. We are introduced to concepts such as *structure, character arcs & theme*. We do our best to apply these and, just as our creations are beginning to find their form and limp along, we abandon them to move onto the next project.

Because we're constantly starting, then abandoning imperfect scripts, we are, in a way, practicing *imperfection*.

The truth is that a first draft only vaguely resembles what it eventually becomes. Sometimes only a few words, phrases, or ideas may survive.

Most of the real lessons learned as a screenwriter come not on the 1st-draft, but on the 11th. Each pass allows us to refine skills and reach a new level of mastery. And do it all faster next time. This is practicing *perfection*.

Which is what we're going to practice in this class.

Because each student may be at a different place in their writing process, we may adjust the class to tailor it to each person's needs. One person may need extensive story-re-breaking, another might need more targeted work.

Sometimes the hardest part about rewriting is learning to let go of a previous vision in order to find a version that works better.

OBJECTIVES:

- Learn the process of rewriting
- Receive and organize notes
- Re-break the story where applicable.
- Create a strategic game plan
- Execute the game plan through a series of focused passes
- Strengthen the main character's story and arc

- Strengthen elements of conflict through relationships
- Add layers of complication and conflict
- Receive a last set of notes to revise after the class is completed
- Find and develop your individual voice as a writer./

COURSE READING

Screenwriting is Rewriting by Jack Epps.
Screenplays in your genre.

HOMEWORK AND NOTES

Homework is due via email 48 hours before class, in order to give your classmates (and teacher) time to read your work, and be prepared and educated enough to give coherent, well thought out, and intelligent notes by class.

Notes are due via email by the start of class. They need not be extensive, but what I'm looking for is *critical faculty*. Pretend you are a development executive and it's your job to shepherd this project, and will have to present the draft to your boss. While line notes are important, what I'm really looking for is your ability to tell if the deeper things in the script, such as plot, character, and theme are working. While it's natural to focus on what is *not* working, sometimes it can be more important to identify where writing is successful. A writer may be unaware of what is working, and by "do more of this" it helps establish a benchmark and direction to which the writer may aspire.

Please send a single email with your notes for all students, rather than individual emails for each, so that you are not clogging up our inboxes. Your assignments should be in .PDF format, and should have your last name at the beginning of the file name. You may make your notes inside the PDF that you are given.

All assignments should be written in final draft, or another screenwriting software that allows for revisions in red, and with *'s at the edge of the page. This is a standard of the industry, and (if you're not already) now is a good a time to become acclimated to it. **Each week the new revisions should be marked with asterisks, and the work from the previous week should no longer be marked,** in this way we can focus only on the most recent changes you have made Please see me with any questions or problems with this.

GRADING AND ABSENCES

The work done through the semester will be applied towards your final grade as follows:

- 10% participation
- 15% outline
- 50% second draft
- 15% polish
- 10% written critical analysis of classmates' work.

Your written critiques of your classmates work each week are not participation.

Participation is the grade you get for spirited discourse inside the class. Your written analysis is a separate grade given for your ability to analyze your colleague's work, and to show understanding of the skills we are teaching in the class. This is important because much of the available work to a screenwriter is "rewrite work" where you have to see the flaws in another persons writing, and be able to not only understand how to fix it, but also be able to convey this convincingly to a producer in order to get the job.

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%

In general, you should assume the following general guidelines as a way of thinking about what type of grade you will receive:

- If you show up to class, and do the minimum required work, you will get a C.
- If you show up to class, and demonstrate a significant effort, you will get a B.
- If you show up to class, demonstrate a significant effort and do exceptional work, you will get an A.
- If you do not show up to class, don't complete your assignments, or fail to complete your assignments in a timely manner, you will get a D or an F.

Your performance in class, and your notes will (each) be worth half a letter grade. Two or more unexcused absences or late assignments will lower your grade a half letter grade. Absences can be excused in advance with permission. Unexcused late assignments will receive an automatic F.

Additional notes on how to get an A: From previous experience, people who get A's apply the notes they are given in class, integrating them into their work each week. They do the work each week not because it was assigned, but because they aspire already to be professional writers. As such, they go beyond the bare minimum of each assignment.

SICK POLICY

If you are sick and still contagious, please do not come to class. If you are unsure whether you are contagious, contact the USC Health Center. Any genuine illness will be accommodated for, and I will make up that class with the student either over the phone, skype, or in person at another time. I would much rather spend an extra couple of

hours with a student when they are well than lose several days of creative time to illness, and I'm sure most of your fellow classmates will feel the same way.

WRITING DIVISION ATTENDANCE POLICY:

Students are expected be on time and prepared for each class. Two unexcused absences will result in your grade being lowered by one full point (ex: A to a (A-). A third unexcused absence will result in your grade being lowered another full point (ex: B to a (B-). Your grade will be lowered by one point for every absence after. Two late arrivals equates to one full absence.

In order for absence to be excused the student must have approval from the professor and provide documentation at the next attended class session.

Please note that if you are a Writing for Screen and Television major/minor you must receive a grade of a C or better in order to receive degree credit. If you have any questions about the minimum grade required for credit please check with your home department.

If you have an emergency and must miss class please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

SCHEDULE:

Date Week Teaching:

1/18 Wk 1 **NO CLASS - Martin Luther Kings Day**

1/25 Wk 2 **Intro Class - Preserving Your Vision: Plot, Character, and Theme – Synergy Theory**

Lecture(s):

- 1) Preserving your vision (while still figuring out how to improve the script.)
- 2) Basic Plot, Character, and Thematic structure – Synergy Theory
- 3) Character Structure Lecture. Character establishment through behaviors, the 4 basic types of character arcs, and executing ultimate change.

Exercise: Bare minimum sentence/paragraph to clarify what the film the students are writing is about.

Assignment(s):

- 1) Write a proposal, finding the central theme of your notes describing the changes you are going to make in the next draft focusing on plot, character, and theme.
- 2) Character Arc Outline.

- 2/1 Wk 3 **Character Outline**
 Discussion: Homework.
 Lecture: Basic Plot Structure. The key scenes of a movie (Inciting Incident, Plot Points, etc.) Breaking movies into Acts, Sequences and Scenes.
 Assignment(s):
 1) Write a Sequence Outline (combined with your Character Arc work from last week.)
- 2/8 Wk 4 **Sequencing & Sequence Outline**
 Discussion: Homework.
 Lecture: Scene Outlines, Theme structure and how to create a Thematic Third act.
 Assignment: Write first half Scene Outline. For those who need the extra time, rewrite the Chapter Outline instead.
- 2/15 Wk 5 **NO CLASS - PRESIDENT'S DAY**
 Optional: Turn in pages and I'll read them. For those who are behind, turn in their scene outlines to catch up.
- 2/22 Wk 6 **Scene Outline (Part 1)**
 Discussion: Homework, finalizing the outlines.
 Lecture(s): How to create a great scene.
 Assignment: Second half of Scene Outline.
- 3/1 Wk 7 **Scene Outline (Part 2)**
 Discussion: Outlines
 Lectures: None, as this is the final week of outlining, focus on outlines.
 Assignment: Revise Outlines
- 3/8 Wk 8 **Revise Outlines to Prepare to go to Script**
 Discussion: Revised Outlines
 Lecture(s): How to establish theme in the opening image, establishing Characters flaws through behavior, & creating character likability (when appropriate).
 Assignment: Write pages 1-15, or 1/8th of the script.
- 3/15 Wk 9 **Pages 1-15 - Character Establishment**
 Discussion: Pages 1-15
 Lecture: Dialogue, and what makes good dialogue. Focusing on the words different people use.
 Assignment: Write pages 15-30, or 2/8ths of the script.

- 3/22 Wk 10 **Pages 15-30 - A New Force Arrives & a Decision is Made**
 Discussion: Pages 15-30
 Lecture: Advanced Dialogue: Subtext and non-linear responses in dialogue.
 Assignment: Write pages 30-45, or 3/8ths of the script.
- 3/29 Wk 11 **Pages 30-45 - Crossing the Threshold. New Rules of the Extraordinary World.**
 Discussion: Pages 30-45, focus on character arc.
 Lecture: Style - how to find your voice.
 Assignment: Write pages 45-60, or 4/8ths of the script.
- 3/24 Wk 12 **Pages 45-60 - Small Changes.**
 Discussion: Pages 45-60
 Lecture: Midpoints: 4 act structure.
 Lecture: Assignment: Write pages 60-75, or 5/8ths fo the script.
- 3/31 Wk 13 **Pages 60-75 - Medium Changes.**
 Discussion: Pages 60-75
 Lecture: The Heroes's Journey. The spiritual journey of a hero, and the heightening of one's consciousness.
 Assignment: Write pages 75-90, or 6/8ths of the script.
- 4/5 Wk 14 **Pages 75-90 - Bigger changes and The Crisis/Plot Point 2**
 Discussion: Pages 75-90
 Lecture: Creating the proper crisis point or Plot Point 2 in order to ask a thematic question of the film, and the main character.
 Assignment: Write pages 90-115, or 7/8ths of the script.
- 4/12 Wk 15 **Pages 90-105 - Inmost Cave**
 Discussion: Pages 90-115
 Lecture: The Supreme Ordeal, The Climax, The Tag
 Assignment: Write pages 115-120, finishing the script.
- 4/19 Wk 16 **Pages 105-120 - The Supreme Ordeal, The Climax, The Tag The**
 Discussion: Pages 115-120
 Lecture: How to punch up dialogue.
 Assignment: Rewrite one character only, and work on their dialogue, focusing on creating a more refined character, and voice.

- 4/26 Wk 17 **The Dialogue Polish, Trim & Punch up drafts.**
 Discussion: Dialogue Rewrite
 Lecture(s): 1) How to trim, polish, and punch up. 2) Business of Screenwriting.
 Assignment: Trim & Punch up 15 pages.
- TBD Wk 18 Final screenplays due.

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.

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.

Computer/Tablet/Cell Phone Use

Students are allowed to use their computers or tablets in class, but only for note-taking. If a student is caught surfing the web, texting, or doing social media, after one warning, your grade will be lowered by one third for every additional time you improperly use your phone, tablet, or computer in class. (Example: A- to B+.)

The midterm and final are based on the Lectures.

RECORDING OF LECTURES ARE PROHIBITED AND WILL RESULT IN A FAILING GRADE

Blogging/Internet Policy

Our class lectures and discussions are considered private communications. Not only will we all be sharing personal stories, but we'll be sharing intellectual property. Additionally, students and guests come into the class with an understanding that their open and free discussion will be in the safety and privacy of a classroom. Anything that takes place in the class, be it discussions, debates, guests talking and/or including Lecture material, is considered off-limits when it comes to posting anywhere on the internet.

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