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

CTWR 523: Introduction to the Screenplay
Section 19305R
Spring 2021

Instructor: Aaron Benay
Class Schedule: Mondays, 4:00-6:50pm
Class Location: Online
Office Hours: By appointment via Zoom
Email: benay@usc.edu

Course Objective:
Students will develop an original concept into a full feature-length screenplay, with a strong central character, compelling character arc, and successful three-act structure.

Course Description:
In writing a screenplay over the course of a semester, students will develop the building blocks of a script, with a focus on characters in which your reader will be emotionally invested. You'll start with a simple idea—the seed from which all great movies grow. You'll develop your main character, whose need and want will drive the story from beginning to end, and who will grow over the course of the hero's journey. You'll bring supporting characters to life, who as unique individuals will have their own desires and motivations. They'll interact with and challenge the main character in their own particular ways—and also speak through dialogue in their own distinct voices.

The first half of the course will focus on what the industry calls "development," which is the gathering of these story elements—because only an amateur would attempt to sit down and write a screenplay without any prior thought or planning. You'll then outline your story, with an emphasis on the experience of your characters. You'll pitch your story in class and receive notes to hone your work, just like professional writers do with other producers, writers, and executives who are involved in the creative process.

Although graduate students will already have training in the fundamentals of screenwriting, we will still review core elements of the screenplay, including character, structure, subplots, dialogue, theme, world-building, etc. Most of the writing assignments will be paired with a reading assignment, in order to reinforce the weekly goal. We will also read screenplays and screen film clips, to show how the most successful creators have put these elements to use.

In the second half of the course, you'll write your screenplay, section by section, building and crafting your story. You'll workshop with and support your classmates along the way, until you have a fully realized feature screenplay at the end of the course.

Requirements:
By the end of the semester, all students **must** complete a first draft of their screenplay—failure to do so will also mean failure of the course. All assignments must be turned in on time. Students must read all submitted materials by the start of class and be prepared for workshop discussions.

Course Reading/Viewing:

Required Reading:

The Screenwriter's Workbook by Syd Field, Delta/Random House, New York 2006

Required Reading/Viewing:

By Week 1:
The Shape of Water

By Week 7:
Crazy Rich Asians

Suggested Reading:

Screenwriting is Rewriting: The Art and Craft of Professional Revision by Jack Epps, Jr., Bloomsbury, New York 2016

Save the Cat by Blake Snyder, Michael Wiese Productions, Studio City, CA 2005

Grading Criteria:
In class, the instructor will direct how the students will deliver assignments via Google Drive. As the class relies on workshopping each other's screenplays, students are responsible for delivering their own assignments and reading each other's materials BEFORE class. This is essential for the class discussion, and for developing your classmates' and your own screenplay successfully.

MATERIALS FOR MONDAY'S CLASS ARE DUE BY 4PM SATURDAY AFTERNOON.

Grading will be dependent on the level of effort, thought, and craft of the writing. As future participants in the entertainment industry, students should conduct themselves in a professional manner. Accordingly, assignments should be delivered on time, and they should be well-considered, neat, properly formatted, and proofread. It's obvious when work is rushed or last-minute, and shoddy work will not be appreciated.

This course is a rigorous class that will prepare students for working as professionals in Hollywood. You will be expected to work collaboratively, just as any professional writer would work in conjunction with producers and studio executives.

You will be required to accept constructive criticism, as well as give it. It's part of the creative process, and even if you don't agree with notes 100%, you must accept them with good grace and find a way to address them in your own way.

Writers are often called upon to work on the fly. So the challenge to both give and receive notes "in the room" is invaluable training for a future career.

You will be kind to and respectful of your classmates, as writing is a fragile process and we all must work in a safe creative space. Lack of participation or contribution in the discussion of other students' work will adversely affect the student's grade.

Last but not least, you will be challenged to be <u>original</u>. You will be pushed to accept not the first idea, nor the second, nor even the third idea that pops into your head. You will not be permitted to default to ideas that you've already seen in other movies or television shows—because that's what makes for derivative work. After all, the goal in this course is to write an <u>original</u> screenplay!

The final grade will be determined as follows:

Homework assignments: 60%
Classroom participation: 10%
Final Screenplay: 30%

                              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%

<u>Expectation of Professionalism:</u>
All material is expected to be turned in on time and in the proper format. Assignments will be penalized for grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, format mistakes, and typos. Please proof your assignment prior to submission.

<u>Internet Policy:</u>
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:
Because this semester's classes will be via Zoom, we'll of course be using laptops--but they are only for the purpose of communication with the class and note-taking. There is to be no texting, emailing, instant messaging or surfing during class time—it's distracting to the professor and your fellow students. If I catch you engaging in these other activities more than once during a class period, I'll ask you to leave class for the day and take an absence.

Cell phones will be put away and silenced during class time. You can look at them during break time. This is the same practice as in the industry—if you're in a notes meeting with producers or studio executives, you must be engaged and participating in the conversation, not on your laptop or phone!

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.

Class Schedule:
Please note that all dates are subject to change at the discretion of the professor. The following is the general class schedule, but the instructor reserves the right to modify the weekly assignments and deadlines, and will notify students in class.

Week 1: January 18, Martin Luther King Jr. Day - NO CLASS

> **Assignment:** Prepare 2 or 3 ideas for a feature that you'll be writing this semester.

> **Assignment:** Read "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 1: The Blank Page, pp. 9-24—just to get your feet wet with the text we'll be using.

> **Assignment:** Screen "The Shape of Water". In advance of the first class, so that we start to share a common set of film references, watch "The Shape of Water," 2018 Academy Award Winner for Best Picture. "The Shape of Water" demonstrates a classic structure, a main character with a clear goal, a network of distinct supporting and opposing characters, and compelling themes.

Week 2: January 25

In the first part of class, we'll have in-class introductions, review the syllabus, and talk about our film influences and inspirations. We'll also discuss what makes great movie ideas and from where they may come.

But as we have no time to waste, we'll dive into your own concepts. Students will pitch story ideas, which will be the basis for the screenplay they'll write over the course of this semester. Please come to the first class prepared with 2 or 3 ideas. (Writers are expected to have lots of ideas!) The class will have a general discussion about developing a concept and answering a core question: "Whose story is it?"

> **Assignment:** Write a rough 1- to 2-page treatment for 2 ideas.

> **Assignment:** Read "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 3: The Paradigm, pp. 41-60 and Chapter 4: Four Pages, pp. 61-78.

Week 3: February 1

Discuss "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 3: The Paradigm, pp. 41-60 and Chapter 4: Four Pages, pp. 61-78.

Discuss story ideas, focusing on who is the main character and what they want vs. need. What is your main character's goal, which will serve as the engine for your story? We will examine both the main character's internal and external story.

Assignment: Expand the treatment for your chosen idea into a 3- to 5-page treatment. Describe what your main character wants, and who or what is stopping him or her from achieving it.

Assignment: Read "The Screenwriter's Workbook," and Chapter 5: What Makes Good Character?, pp. 79-94 and Chapter 6: The Tools of Character, pp. 95-112.

Week 4: February 8

Discuss "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 5: What Makes Good Character?, pp. 79-94 and Chapter 6: The Tools of Character, pp. 95-112.

Discuss expanded treatments. Also, discuss the "internal character story," which is the emotional heart of your screenplay. We'll read and/or watch select scenes from "Silence of the Lambs," which showcased both an iconic protagonist and villain of modern cinema—and which were Academy Award-winning roles for Best Actress and Best Actor.

Discuss types and functions of subplots.

Assignment: Develop a character biography that focuses on your main character's external character want vs. their internal character need.

Assignment: Read "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 7: Conflict and the Circle of Being, pp. 113-126.

Assignment: Start a beat sheet for your script.

Week 5: February 15 - Presidents' Day - NO CLASS

Assignment: Read "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 9: Structuring Act I, pp. 149-163.

Assignment: Continue outlining in your beat sheet.

Week 6: February 22

Discuss "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 7: Conflict and the Circle of Being, pp. 113-126 and Chapter 9: Structuring Act I, pp. 149-163.

Discuss the nature and role of character relationships. How can supporting characters enhance the main character's own story—for instance, by challenging him or her, and raising the stakes of the story?

Assignment: Create at least 4-5 supporting characters with whom your main character interacts. Who are they? What are their backstories? Why are they important to your main character? Do they support your main character, or are their goals in conflict?

Assignment: Watch "Crazy Rich Asians," if you haven't already screened it.

Assignment: Read "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 10: The First Ten Pages, pp. 164-179.

Assignment: Continue outlining in your beat sheet.

Week 7: March 1

Discuss Chapter 10: The First Ten Pages, pp. 164-179

Discuss classmates' character relationships. Discuss the ties that bind characters in a screenplay. Examine how bonds between characters can evolve over the course of the story, and the arc of relationships. Discuss the network of characters, with their various personalities, in "Crazy Rich Asians."

Assignment: Write 1st sequence, approx. pages 1-15.

Assignment: Read "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 11: The Second and Third Ten Pages, pp. 180-192.

Week 8: March 8

Discuss the first sequence, with the goal of simplifying and clarifying story and plot problems. Focus on the "world" of the story.

Discuss "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 11: The Second and Third Ten Pages, pp. 180-192.

Assignment: Write 2nd sequence, approx. pages 15-25.

Assignment: Read "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 12: Finding the Midpoint, pp. 193-209.

Week 9: March 15

Discuss 2nd sequence, addressing supporting characters and character relationships, as they begin to intersect.

Before we head into Act 2 in our next writing assignment, discuss "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 12: Finding the Midpoint, pp. 193-209

Assignment: Write 3rd sequence, approx. pages 25-40. By now, you should have established and started to develop the major character relationships.

Assignment: Read "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 13: First Half, Second Half, pp. 210-228.

Week 10: March 22

Discuss "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 13: First Half, Second Half, pp. 210-228.

Discuss 3rd sequence. Discuss how subplots and character relationships can raise the stakes for the main character and help build a strong second act.

> **Assignment:** Write 4th sequence, approx. pages 40-55.

> **Assignment:** Read "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 14: Writing Act II, pp. 229-249

Week 11: March 29

Discuss "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 14: Writing Act II, pp. 229-249.

Discuss 4th sequence. Focus on the main character's goal, which will provide the narrative drive for Act 2. Discuss the pivotal midpoint, one of the most important plot turns in the screenplay.

> **Assignment:** Write 5th sequence, approx. pages 55-70.

> **No reading assignment.**

Week 12: April 5

Discuss the 5th sequence, with a focus on the key relationship in the screenplay. The major relationships should be well developed at this point, with subplots complementing and/or complicating the main plot.

> **Assignment:** Write 6th sequence, approx. pages 70-85.

> **Assignment:** Read "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 15: Act III: The Resolution, pp. 250-264.

Week 13: April 12

Discuss 6th sequence. As we barrel toward the end of Act 2, the main character should be close to achieving his or her goal. But the complications of plot, subplots, and relationships are undermining this objective.

Before we head into Act 2 in our next writing assignment, discuss "The Screenwriter's Workbook," Chapter 15: Act III: The Resolution, pp. 250-264.

> **Assignment:** Write 7th sequence (first half of Act 3), approx. pages 85-100.

> **No reading assignment.**

Week 14: April 19

Discuss 7th sequence. In the first half of Act 3, stakes should be raised and tension should be rising. Before the main plot climax, major character relationships and subplots should begin to resolve.

> **Assignment:** Write 8th sequence, approx. pages 100-115.

> **No reading assignment.**

Week 15: April 26

Discuss 8th sequence—which now completes a full draft of the screenplay. Discuss how students have progressed and what they should focus on in revisions. Classmates will give notes on a script "polish," which may include character consistency, relationship clarification, dialogue, plot, etc.

> **Assignment:** Students will deliver a complete revised and polished screenplay by the date of the scheduled final exam.

Finals Week:

Students will deliver a complete revised and polished screenplay by the date of the scheduled final exam.

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 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
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.

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