

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

CTWR 409: “Fundamentals of Screenwriting: Character, Conflict, & Story”
Spring 2021 – 4 units

Instructor: Siavash Farahani
Class Schedule: Wed, 4-7pm
Class Location: Online
Office Hours: By appointment
Contact Information: sfarahan@usc.edu

Course Objective:

To learn the professional approach of writing relatable characters, in conflict driven scenes, with an authentic voice. In addition, students will learn the 3-act structure and how to create a compelling world. The culmination in this class will be the first act of a feature script.

Course Description:

As an introductory course for non-majors, “Fundamentals of Screenwriting” is a fundamental course that focuses on the craft of storytelling. The focus will be on discovering your creative voice, the mechanics of scene work, creating compelling character arcs, and understanding the 3-act structure of feature films.

Through scene work, character work, and story development students will learn the tools of crafting professional scenes. The culmination of this course will be a first act of a feature script of 25-30 pages.

Course Reading:

Books:

The Tools of Screenwriting by David Howard and Edward Mabley
Save the Cat by Blake Snyder

Screenplays:

“Moonlight” by Barry Jenkins
“Joker” by Todd Phillips & Scott Silver
“Booksmart” by Sarah Haskins

Additional reading and viewing as assigned by instructor

Class Schedule:

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

Week 1 01/20/21:

Introduction to Course /Lecture “A Good Story Well Told”

Assignment #1: Write scene of Atmosphere (5%)

Assignment #2: Watch Moonlight and read the screenplay at home for

in class discussion next week. Look for use of atmosphere.

Assignment #3: Start reading Tools of Screenwriting and Save the Cat. You should be trying to read at least one chapter of each book every week until the end of the semester. Be ready to discuss in class.

Week 2 01/27/21:

Discuss Moonlight. Workshop Scenes of Atmosphere / Developing conflict from emotional story of characters/Using Plant and Payoff to create tension and catharsis

Assignment #1: Write a scene of direct conflict and use plan and pay off to resolve the conflict (5%)

Assignment #2: Watch and Read “The Joker” for in class discussion. Look for examples of conflict and plant and payoff.

Week 3 02/03/21:

Workshop scenes of Conflict, plant & payoff /Establishing character through action and dialog. Discuss The Joker.

Research: Listen in on at least two (2) conversations during the next week. Take notes of each person’s use of diction, body language and point of view

Assignment #1: Write a scene revealing character through action and dialogue (5%)

Assignment #2: Watch and Read “Booksmart” for in class discussion. Look for examples of character revelation through action and dialogue.

Week 4 02/10/21:

Lecture: 3 Act Structure and the art of the logline

Assignment #1: Create 3 loglines to pitch to class next week (5%)

Assignment #2: Watch The Matrix and create breakdown with corresponding story and timecode for major story beats

Week 5 02/17/21:

Pitch 3 loglines to class and workshop/Choose logline to develop as final project/Discuss Matrix breakdown.

Assignment #1: Create character bio for Protagonist and Antagonist. Each bio should be 1 page, 3 paragraphs. First paragraph should be about the character’s past life before the events of the story, one paragraph on the character’s present life during the course of the story, one paragraph on the character’s future life after the events of the story (15%)

Week 6 02/24/21:

Workshop character bios/ Break into Writing Groups A & B

Assignment #1: Create beat sheet outline for final feature script

Week 7 03/03/21:

Workshop outlines.

Assignment #1: Group A & B both start writing Act I, Sequence1. Group A will table read and workshop their sequence in class next week. (15%)

Week 8 03/10/21:

Workshop Group A, Act I Sequence 1

Assignment #1 : Both groups keep writing. Group B will workshop Act I, Sequence 1 in class next week.

Week 9 03/17/21:

Workshop Group B, Act I Sequence 1

Assignment #1: Both groups keep writing. Group A will workshop Act I, Sequence 2 in class next week.

Week 10 03/24/21:

Workshop Group A, Act I Sequence 2

Assignment #1: Both groups keep writing. Group B will workshop Act I, Sequence 2 in class next week.

Week 11 03/31/21:

Workshop Group B, Act I Sequence 2

Assignment #1: Both groups keep writing and start revisions. Group A will workshop revised Act I in class next week.

Week 12 04/07/21: WELLNESS DAY, NO CLASS

Assignment #1: Both groups keep writing and start revisions. Group B will workshop revised Act I in class next week.

Week 13 04/14/21:

Workshop Group A Revised ACT I

Assignment #1: Both groups keep working on script revisions.

Week 14 04/21/21:

Continue to workshop and revise scripts and scenes from both groups.

Week 15 04/28/21:

Final class. Guest speaker. Continue to workshop and revise scripts and scenes from both groups.

Finals Week: Act One of Feature Script Due by 12 pm on 05/12/21 (30%)

Grading Criteria:

Students will turn in their work by 1pm on Thursday by uploading to corresponding assignment folder in the class Dropbox.

Participation: 10%

Scene: Atmosphere 5%

Scene: Conflict/Payoff 5%

Scene:Character/Dialog	5%
3 Loglines	5%
Character Bios:	15%
Outline:	25%
First Act	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%

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.

Expectation of Professionalism:

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.

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:

Laptops may be used for the purpose of taking notes during workshop. Cell phones should not be used in the classroom.

NOTE: 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.

Writing Division Attendance Policy:

Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. On the third absence, students will have their final grade lowered by 10% and an additional 10% for each absence thereafter. Two late arrivals equate to one full absence.

Note: This is a change in policy. Instructors will no longer distinguish between an excused or unexcused absence. An absence will be an absence. 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/or know you will miss class please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

If a student has an emergency and additional accommodations are needed, those accommodations will need to come through the USC Campus Support and Intervention (CSI) office. The Writing Division recommends the student and/or advocate contact CSI at 213-821-4710 and their home department adviser for additional support.

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.

In the case of medical emergencies, family emergencies, or allowances needed for personal well-being, all concerns must be communicated and approved by the Instructor. If there is a difference of opinion, the student can contact the Writing Division at (213) 740-3303 or writing@cinema.usc.edu

If a student has an emergency and additional accommodations are needed, those accommodations will need to come through the USC Campus Support and Intervention (CSI) office. The Writing Division recommends the student and/or advocate contact CSI at 213-821-4710 and their home department adviser for additional support.

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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 genderbased 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.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

ombuds.usc.edu

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

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-ordiscrimination/>

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.