

School of Cinematic Arts
Writing Division
CTWR 415A: Advanced Writing
Spring 2021

Instructor: Craig Sabin
Class Schedule: Mondays 10:00 am-1:00 pm
Class Location: The Zoom Room
Office Hours: By appointment
Contact Information: rsabin@usc.edu

Course Objective:

This class will focus on “breaking your story”, making sure that it has all the elements you’ll need to create a detailed outline for a future feature screenplay. We’ll also dig deep into sequence structure, familiarizing you with the mechanics of narrative, as well as the structure. We’ll focus extensively on your second act, where good screenplay ideas go to die. At the end, developing your character arc, beat sheet and outline, you should have a deeper understanding of how story elements work, and how you can use them to more effectively and powerfully communicate your experience and truth. You should be ready to start writing over the summer.

Course Description:

There is so much that is out of our hands, and it is easy to feel powerless in the face of the global pandemic. But one thing we can do is **write**. In fact, these dismal times are great for writers-- so much material, so much time to think and write. And you’ll do a lot of that this semester.

In CTWR 415, we will muscle our way through the screenwriting preparation process, from pitch to detailed outline and beyond. We’ll do it right, we’ll do it well, and we’ll do it in fourteen weeks! We will begin with an in-depth exploration of the relationship between screenplay elements, such as Main Character, Goal, Inner Flaw, Theme, Conflict, Transformation and Resolution. Using these elements, we’ll develop a bio and detailed arc for your feature’s Main Character, as well as a beat sheet and a detailed story outline. Finally (if time permits), we will break ground on your script, creating the first 15 pages, establishing genre and tone.

In addition to the writing, one of the greatest learning opportunities in this class is reading and noting up the work of your peers. You’ll learn how to give notes, how to take them, and how to work constructively through the creative process as part of a development team. Very often, the notes you should take are the ones you’re trying to give to others.

Finally, screenplays will be assigned for reading, and we will watch the elements and tools discussed in class at work in produced movies. You’ll see how filmmakers before you dealt with the issues you’re dealing with and learn from them what to do, and what to avoid.

Assignments:

Assignments will be due the Thursday following class, by 8:00 pm. All students are expected to read and make notes on all the work submitted by the deadline. In addition;

Main Character Arc Outline: Students will create a short bio of the main character in your feature outline, with an additional series of scenes detailing the transition (or lack thereof) from flawed to unflawed, 3-5 pages in length.

Beat Sheet; Students will create a beat sheet for their screenplay, with a focus on Act 2 and the Hero's transformation. (3 pages)

Outline; Students will map out their feature story beats in a 4-8 page outline.

The first fifteen (15) pages of your screenplay, in screenplay format.

Course Requirements

Word processing Software

Adobe PDF creation capability

Screenwriting Software or script formatting capability (ex. Final Draft)

Course Reading:

Required; THE NEW ELEMENTS OF STANDARD SCREENPLAY FORMAT by Jean-Paul Ouellette.

Recommended; SAVE THE CAT by Blake Snyder

MAKING A GOOD SCRIPT GREAT by Linda Seger

Deadlines:

Deadlines are an intrinsic part of writing professionally. When you write a screenplay, you make a series of demands; demands for money, time, favors, and the expertise of hundreds of film professionals. If all of these pieces are in place, but your pages are not ready, it is an unconscionable breach of trust. Also, you're fired.

We take deadlines very seriously in this course. We must, in order to get you to a working, detailed outline. The worst thing you can do to your grade, your script, or your reputation, is to consistently miss deadlines. The key to success in this class is to **write every day**, and try and stay ahead of assignments so when other classes keep you busy, you have a little breathing room.

Grading Criteria:

Students must turn in all assignments in PDF format. All work must be properly formatted, properly punctuated, correctly spelled and grammatically correct. In-class assignments must be turned in by the end of class on the day in which they are due.

Participation:	10%
Assignments:	20% (11 assignments, 1.82% each)
Character Bio:	15%
Beat Sheet:	20%
Feature Outline:	20%

First 15 Pages: 15%

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%

Late Assignments will be recorded as such and will negatively impact your final grade, each late day increasing the penalty.

Missed Assignment or Incompletes: The only acceptable excuses for missing an assignment or taking an incomplete in the course are personal illness or a family emergency. Students must inform the instructor *before* the assignment due date and present verifiable evidence in order for a make-up to be scheduled. Students who need to take incompletes must also present documentation of the problem to the instructor before the final assignment is due.

All work must originate in this class – no revisions of work started in other classes or adaptations of others' work will be accepted without the prior permission of the instructor.

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.

NETIQUETTE

During Zoom Workshop Classes

- Keep yourself muted unless called on.
- If your camera is on, please dress as you would in the classroom, and behave as you would in a professional environment.

In Larger Lecture classes

- If you have a question for the DAs during the lecture, use the Chat function. (The DA will direct my attention to the question if they can't answer it.)
- If you want to ask a question out loud, use the "raise your hand" function on Zoom. A little blue hand will appear so that the DA knows you want to speak. The DA will get my attention. Don't unmute until called on. • I answer questions in the fifteen minutes before and after the live lecture.

Posting in Forums

- Write as if you were speaking in a class discussion: relaxed in tone but respectful, polite, and professional in your choice of words.
- Post thoughtful and meaningful responses to questions and answers. The point is to have an ongoing discussion with your Blackboard Group of ten students and one DA. Your professor will be joining discussions as well.

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 emotional; 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.

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:

Respect is the rule, especially in the Zoom era. Please silence cell phones during class. Keep your camera on to assure your fellow students that you are there and listening. Use the chat function to give real time responses. Keep yourself muted unless you have a note. Please show the class and your fellow students the respect they deserve.

Class Schedule:

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

Week 1 1/25: Introductions. Class Business, Syllabus, Dropbox. Feature structure Overview. The Eight Chapter Outline. The Mechanics of Narrative-- Goal, Flaw, Mini-Goals, Conflict and Dealing With It, with Consequence/New Status Quo. What are sequence tensions?

Assignment; Prepare three feature pitches, to be presented verbally in class, due 2/01.
Reading; "Get Out" screenplay by Jordan Peele.

Week 2 2/01: Workshop Pitches, Choose Screenplay Projects. Character/Hero. Who the hell is this guy and why do I care? What drives a character to action? The vital elements of a character. Character Arc over the feature story-- the Power of Act 2! Goals and Mini-Goals.

Assignment; Write an essay identifying the Hero's Goal in "Get Out". What is the Hero's Flaw? What is the Goal? Break down the Overall Goal into Mini-Goals. Identify beats of Change in Act 2. 2-5 pgs. maximum. Due 2/04.

Week 3 2/08: Workshop Essays. Connecting Story to Flaw, using Flaw to build your world. Transformation, Conflict and Characters. Flaw's connection to Theme, your Truth, the reason you're writing this script. How do you convey that meaning and vitality to an audience? How does your ending relate to Theme? How do Props and Goals indicate Theme? We'll explore Transformation, Lack of Transformation, and in between.

Assignment: Character Bio. Write a brief bio of your Hero, identifying the past trauma that established the Flaw, why the Flaw is a choice, and how the Flaw will drive the Hero's pursuit of the Goal. Identify how the Flaw will be shown in behavior in Act 1. Identify Second Act scenes where forced beats of change will occur. Tell us how the Transformation will play out. Be specific. Be powerful. 3-5 pgs. max. Due 2/18 (15% of your grade.)

Reading; "The World's End" screenplay by Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright

Week 4 2/15: Happy President's Day! Read "The World's End" and work on your bio.

Week 5 2/22: Workshop Character Bios. Conflict! Sequence Structure! Conflict and connection to flaw. The relationship between Antagonist and Protagonist. How does it all come together in the feature script? How does it come together in each scene or scene sequence? How do you construct compelling sequences? What is the value of compression and stock-piling conflict? We'll find great examples of sequences in "The World's End". We'll watch clips from "The Abyss" and "Some Like It Hot".

Assignment: Create two detailed sequences for your script with goal, conflict, dealing w/ it and consequences. Make one a "beat of change" sequence. Due 2/25

Week 6 3/01 Workshop sequences. Beat Sheet-- our first stab at laying out your movie. What is the set-up? Inciting Incident? First steps on path? First Act Twist? Writer's Toolbox; A deep dive into twists, Plant/Payoffs, Misdirection, Props, P.O.V., Mood, Genre.

Assignment; Write a first draft beat sheet for your feature. (3 pg. max.) Identify where in the set up the Hero demonstrates the Flaw in behavior. Due 3/04

Reading; "Spotlight" by Josh Singer and Tom McCarthy.

Week 7 3/08: Beat Sheet Workshop. Relationships, source of motivation, conflict and transformation. How do the relationships connect to theme? How can relationships move your Hero towards a Transformation? How can relationships motivate your Hero? We'll also look at the Act 1 outline, and find opportunities for establishing these vital relationships, diving deep on the Act 1 Twist. We'll watch clips from Iron Man and Double Indemnity.

Assignment; Write a detailed Act 1 Outline for your script (1-3 pages) Make sure to include the Flaw in Behavior, the Inciting Incident, the First Steps sequence, and the First Act Twist. Due 3/11

Week 8 3/15: Act 1 Outline workshop. Fun and Games! What the hell does that mean? The promise of your premise, and how to find it. Brainstorming session on sequence creation for your Fun and Games, looking for beats of change in your Hero. We'll discuss the importance of sequence tensions and how to use them to focus your story. We'll watch clips from the Matrix and Miller's Crossing.

Assignment: Write your Chapter 3 detailed outline (3 pgs. max.), including the chapter tension, tension resolution, and two sequences, one with a beat of change. Due 3/18.

Reading; "The Sting" screenplay by David Ward.

Week 9 3/22: Chapter 3 Outline Workshop. Let's do it again, this time building to the midpoint. False Victory? Temporary Setback? Brainstorm Session. Explore Twist opportunities, Plant/Payoff Opportunities, props, dialogue, circumstances, keeping an eye on transformation

Assignment; Write Chapters 3 and 4 Detailed Outline (5 pgs. max), including the chapter tensions, tension resolutions, and four sequences, two with beats of change. Due 3/25.

Week 10 3/29: Chapter 3 and 4 Outline Workshop. Bad Guys Close In. (Remember all the conflict we demanded? Here's why!) Driving your Hero towards their Transformation. Bad Guys Sequences, All is Lost Sequence, and earning that Transformation. We'll look at illustrative examples from The Grinch and Rocky.

Assignment; Write Chapters 5 and 6 Detailed Outline, (3 pgs. max.) with chapter tensions, tension resolutions, and three sequences, one with a beat of change (not counting the transformational sequence.) Due 4/02.

Reading; "Rosemary's Baby" screenplay.

Week 11 4/05: Chapter 5 and 6 Outline workshop. Act 3. Turn the Tables and the Final Boss Battle. This is the big finish to your movie. We'll explore methods to ramp up the conflict in ways that test your Character's transformation, and watch clips from illustrative movies.

Assignment: Write your Act 3 Detailed Outline (3 pgs. max), making sure to detail crucial plant/payoffs. Get clear on your Boss Battle Sequence, and give us a sense of your New Normal. Due 4/08

Week 12 4/12: Workshop Act 3. Whew! We outlined your feature. Now let's test some of the story beats out. Outline Workshop Group B. The difference between outline and treatment. How to write effective visual scripts. Dialogue traps to avoid. Crafting your Fun and Games Sequences.

Assignment; In proper screenplay format, write a Fun and Games sequence from your outline. Make sure the Goal, Plan and Motivation are clear. Make sure the Conflict challenges the Hero's Flaw. Make sure the Hero "Deals With It", and be prepared to discuss the Consequences, aka New Status Quo. (7 pgs. max.) Due 4/15
Reading Assignment; "The Hospital" by Paddy Chayefsky

Week 13 4/19: Workshop Fun and Games Sequence script pages

Assignment; In proper screenplay format, write Chapter 3 of your script, using your outline to guide you. 15 pgs. Due 4/22

Week 14 4/26: Workshop Chapter 3 script pages. Next steps. Great writers to watch and read.

Assignment; Prepare your Final Drafts of your Beat Sheet, Outline and script pages

Finals Week; Final draft of your Outline (4-8 pages), Beat Sheet (3 pages) and opening 15 script pages due **Friday, May 7th.**

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.