

USC School of Cinematic Arts

JOHN WELLS DIVISION OF
WRITING FOR SCREEN AND TELEVISION
FALL 2021

CTWR 414: THE SCREENPLAY
Mondays 10AM - 12:50PM
SCI 209
19191D (2 units; prerequisite CTR 413)

INSTRUCTOR: Amy Toomin Straus
astraus@usc.edu
310.595.4001 (text or phone)
Office hours by appointment (Zoom or phone)

COURSE OBJECTIVES: Develop a short-script, from idea to polished draft. Develop a feature-length story, from pitch to outline to first draft of the first act.

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND GOALS: You will leave this class having walked a mile in a writer's shoes. Well, maybe half a mile. Or maybe it's that you will have put on a writers hat and decide, "Hey I really am a hat person!"

Regardless... you will definitely go from idea to polished draft of a short screenplay. You will develop characters, world, and plot for a feature screenplay. You will outline a feature and write the first draft of the first act. You will create unique characters with strong inner lives and complex relationships. You'll establish a clear personal connection to drive and enliven the story. There's no question you will deepen your understanding of narrative cinematic technique and structure, as you will likely have a lightbulb moment or two. You'll come to understand format, visual writing style, and dialogue. And you'll learn how to cut what you love for the sake of your story.

The short screenplay you write in this class may be eligible to be produced and shot in the 480 class. **It is YOUR responsibility to check with Production Office for 480 script submission deadline and guidelines.**

CLASS SCHEDULE (Dates & assignments may change. Any assignment given out in class supersedes this schedule - if you have a question about what you've been assigned, please email me for clarification):

Class 1 (August 23)

Introductions, overview, class requirements & syllabus
General discussion of Film
Discussion of shorts vs features
Discussion of screenplay structure
Discussion of idea generation

Assignment: Come in with 3 ideas for your 8-10 page short.
Submit written version to Blackboard by 10AM August 29.

Class 2 (August 30)

Discussion of giving and receiving feedback
Discussion of outlines
Let's pitch! Workshop story ideas.

Assignment: Write a scene with conflict which introduces your main character and the world of the story. Submit to Blackboard by 10AM September 12.

NO CLASS SEPTEMBER 6TH (LABOR DAY).

Class 3 (September 13)

Workshopping of scenes.

Assignment: Write your outline as directed. Submit to Blackboard by 10AM September 19.

Class 4 (September 20)

Workshopping of outlines.

Assignment: Write your short screenplay as directed. Submit to Blackboard by 10AM September 26.

Class 5 (September 27)

Table read short screenplays. Feedback discussion.

Assignment: Rewrite & polish screenplays as directed. Submit to Blackboard by 10AM October 3. Start thinking about Feature ideas.

Class 6 (October 4)

Table read remaining short screenplays, and give feedback. Discuss feature screenplay ideas.

Assignment: Broadly determine what happens in Acts 1, 2, & 3 and what the two plot points are. Submit to Blackboard by 10AM October 10.

Class 7 (October 11)

Finish up table reads for remaining short screenplays. Discuss the joys of using index cards to outline a feature screenplay.

Assignment: Outline your feature as directed. Submit to Blackboard by 10AM October 17.

Class 8 (October 18)

Workshop outlines.

Assignment: Continue outlining your feature. Find comparable produced films and study them for structure, character introductions, conflicts, themes and other elements. Be prepared to discuss in class. (If you'd like to screen a scene in an existing film during the next class please let me know by **10AM October 23**). Submit all outline work to Blackboard by 10AM October 24.

Class 9 (October 25)

Workshop outlines. Discuss/screen scenes from comparable films.

Assignment: Write the first half Act One. Submit to Blackboard by 10AM October 31.

Class 10 (November 1)

Table read pages. Discuss feedback.

Assignment: Revise and finish Act One as directed.

Class 11 (November 8)

Table read pages. Discuss feedback.

Assignment: Revise and finish Act One as directed.

Class 12 (November 15)

Table read pages. Discuss feedback.
Discussion of revision strategies.

Assignment: Revise Act One as directed.

Class 13 (November 22 - Thanksgiving Week)

Table read select scenes. Discuss feedback.

Assignment: Revise Act One as directed.

Class 14 (November 29 - Last Class)

Table read select scenes. Discuss feedback.
Reflections on completing first act. Discuss next steps in feature writing and development process. Discussion of writing spec vs. pitching feature films. Discussion of contests, fellowships, etc.

Assignment: Polish Act One.

YOUR REVISED ACT ONE IS DUE ON DECEMBER 6TH AT 10AM

Recommended Reading

- Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting by Syd Field
- As many produced screenplays as you can get your hands on. Free scripts are available on Blackboard or www.simplyscripts.com or you can try Googling. Make sure you are reading an actual screenplay and not a transcription. And opt for a screenplay vs a TV script.

ALL ABOUT GRADES:

10% = in-class participation

Students must participate in all classroom discussions of all submitted material. That means giving thoughtful and helpful notes on your classmates' work is mandatory.

40% = homework and deadlines

Students must complete each assignment by being well-prepared for class, putting forth their best effort, striving for originality, and meeting deadlines. Typos wound my heart. Please proofread carefully. Failure to collaborate well, or to deliver quality work on time will get you fired in Hollywood, and it will certainly get you a poor grade in this class. You will lose 3 points for work handed in late. (This means your A- likely becomes a B+). You may, at my discretion, receive credit for late work, depending on circumstances.

20% = the short script, 8-10 pages

30% = the feature outline, 8-10 pages + polished first act, 25-30 pages

Character, structure, dialogue, style, theme, tone, atmosphere, and general effect will all factor into the determination of these grades, as will the improvement and maturation of each individual student.

Per Writing Division policy the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:

A	100% - 94%
A-	93% - 90%
B+	89% - 87%
B	86% - 83%
C	76% - 73%
C-	72% - 70%
D+	69% - 67%
D	66% - 63%
D-	62% - 60%
F	59% - 0%

Writing Division Attendance Policy:

Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Two unexcused absences will result in your grade being lowered by 5%. Your grade will be lowered by 5% for every absence after. Two late arrivals equate to one full absence.

In order for an 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 me prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

Internet Policy:

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be screenshot, blogged, tweeted, 'grammed, facebooked, snapchatted, myspaced, or posted anywhere on the internet. I consider my classroom to be a creative safe space.

Recording Devices:

You may not record lectures or workshops without my consent.

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.