

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
The John Wells Division of Writing for Screen and Television

CTWR 505: Writing the Short Script

FALL 2021

(Two Units, Required, Section #19281D)

Instructor: Robert Ramsey
Class Schedule: Tuesday 2-4:50 p.m.
Class Location: SCB 304
Office Hours: By appointment.
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Cell: 323-394-9471

"In dreams begins responsibility." – W.B. Yeats

Your point of view, which is your voice, your person, isn't something you have to get. It's something you have to uncover. – Hanif Kureishi

*"Directing students should spend a year making films with their typewriters."
– Alfred Hitchcock*

GOALS OF THIS COURSE:

- Ideation: To develop your cinematic imagination; you will be honing your skills of **observation** as well as studying how **memory** and **experience** can bring originality and brilliance to your characters and stories (with emphasis on your 507/508 scripts.)
- Character: To strengthen & deepen your ability to conceive characters that will lead to compelling stories.
- Voice: To explore and develop your artistic point of view and original cinematic voice. (*Who are your cinematic heroes and why?*)
- Research: To develop ideas for stories and characters through observation of, research into, and direct experience with real life.
- Visualization: To learn to write from a visual and aural perspective.
- Technique: To understand the structure and *economy* of effective screenwriting.

- Dramatic Scene: To develop a fundamental understanding of the dramatic scene.
- Short Scripts: To learn to write effective and moving short scripts (507 & 508.)
- Rewriting: To understand the importance of rewriting.

This is an introductory course in writing for the screen in which you will develop your resources as a storyteller: your memory and observation, your responsiveness to stories around you, and of course your imagination, your ability to create and develop compelling dramatic characters and cinematic conflict.

We will begin with **visualization**, the concept of telling a story with pictures. You will learn to bring the inner life of your characters to the screen without dialogue by using planting and payoff, action and activity, location, props, costume, atmosphere and motivation. We will discover that it is possible (and indeed necessary) to tell your stories visually, to make them compelling and rich with meaning by using these basic techniques.

Later, we will combine these techniques with dialogue in a second stage of exercises designed to teach you the major building block of cinema – the scene. We will expand our work with character and study the ingredients necessary to make any scene work. By exploring our character’s goals, intentions, or “wants” we will discover that the lifeblood of any scene is **conflict**.

The class will take place in a workshop setting. Together we will read and critique a series of weekly assignments, both non-dialogue and dialogue, designed to help you understand the fundamentals of screenwriting. You will learn to hear your film as you write it, while at the same time you will discover the importance of character as it is explored through situations of conflict. You will also be learning how to be an active member of a “writer’s room.”

During the last four weeks of the semester you will apply all your skills to writing and rewriting *the 5 page, CTPR 508 screenplay*.

Screenwriting format is not an exact science; within accepted parameters, you should develop a format style that you find both comfortable and expressive. To help you learn format and an expressive, cinematic writing style, I urge you to read as many professional screenplays as possible. You will be required to read and analyze three screenplays provided by the instructor. By the third session I expect your assignments to be written in a professional format -- assignments not meeting that standard will be returned unread. I recommend using Final Draft. If you don’t own the software, you can download a free demo version—with watermark—from the Final Draft website (<http://www.finaldraft.com/downloads/demo-final-draft.php>). You may use this demo version to do all your assignments. *Celtx* software program is also available for free.

READING LIST:

1. *The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writer's Guide to the Craft and Elements of a Screenplay*, by David Howard & Edward Mabley
2. *Creative Filmmaking From the Inside Out*, Dannenbaum, Hodge, Mayer (Fireside, 2003)
3. Three feature screenplays or pilots (**required**, provided by instructor).
Possible screenplays: *The Descendants*, *A Single Man*, *Moonlight*, *Booksmart*, *Eighth Grade*, *The Social Network*...

EVALUATION CRITERIA:

CTWR 505 grades will be based on careful consideration in the following areas of the students' work:

- Student must demonstrate understanding of the fundamental principles of ideation, visualization, creating compelling characters and writing the scene via the weekly assignments.
- The student must demonstrate an understanding of how to write a short script
- The student must demonstrate the understanding of how to rewrite a scene.
- The student must demonstrate the ability to read and respond to other student's work. Class participation includes full involvement in and contribution to all class discussions, as well as reading (in advance at times; see schedule) the assignments of the other students and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.
- Class attendance is mandatory, and includes being on time to class (otherwise, the students who present their material first are short-changed).
- You are allowed one unexcused absence (documentation required for excused absences). Beyond one, you will receive a reduction of one-third letter grade for each unexcused absence. (e.g., A- down to B+, B down to B-)
- Tardiness is unprofessional, and so will be considered unacceptable. You will be allowed one unexcused tardiness. After that, you will have your grade lowered by one-sixth of a letter grade for each occurrence. For example: Two tardies = A- to B+. BE ON TIME. IT IS HIGHLY INCONSIDERATE OF YOUR CLASSMATES NOT TO BE.
- Assignments turned in late will be marked down.

GRADING WEIGHTS:

CTWR 505 grades are based on:

- Weekly Assignments.....50%
- Reading and Responding to Workshop Assignments.....20%
- Final 508 Script.....30%

LETTER GRADES:

100-93....A	82-80....B-	69-67.....D+
93-90.....A-	79-77....C+	66-63.....D
89-87.....B+	76-73....C	62-60.....D-
86-83.....B	72-70....C-	0-59.....F

PRESENTATION:

As you are hoping to enter the film industry as professionals, I expect your work to be prepared in a professional manner. Screenplay formatting errors, typos, bad spelling or grammar and overall sloppiness are NOT ACCEPTABLE.

FORMAT: Scripts must be **typed in 12 pt. Courier**

- Name every document you email the group as follows:

Your Name_AssignmentName.Format

Example: Baker_MemoryAssignment.doc, or Baker_MemoryAssignment.pdf

*****Create a TITLE PAGE for each assignment you submit, including title, author name, date and email address.**

****** Put your name, the title and page number on the Header of EACH PAGE of your material. Refer to the SCHEDULE for due dates of specific assignments.**

All work must be delivered to the class Dropbox or Blackboard in PDF format or emailed to group at least 24 hours before class time.

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.

Classroom Decorum:

The professor expects all students to respect and support the ideas and writing of their fellow students. Writing is a sensitive process and while we should ask questions, analyze and even challenge, we want to remain supportive, always keeping in mind that the screenplay is a work-in-progress. A working writer needs to develop *the art of collaboration* while working with their peers.

Internet Policy:

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, snapchatted, or posted anywhere else on the internet. Violations are subject to university disciplinary policy.

Laptop Policy:

Laptops may be used in class but only for purposes of classwork. Students should not be surfing during class time unless instructed otherwise by the instructor. Violation of policy could result in laptop privileges being suspended.

CTWR 505 WEEKLY SCHEDULE

WEEK ONE - MEMORY

In class assignment – TRIP TO SCHOOL

- List the places you went to school.
- List how you got to each school. Pick the hottest place/trip emotionally.

- List things, places, activities, people, clothes connected with that trip.
- Now describe one trip to the class, tell us how you got to school. (More “telling”, less “reading”.)

Assignment for next week:

1. *Read first assigned script – who is the main character, what does he/she actively want in story?*
2. *2nd “Memory” Prompt*
Describe the following memories:
 - My favorite toy as a child.
 - A secret place I used to go.
 - The most frightening person in my childhood.

1 page each. Describe the specifics of objects, person, place. Feelings and mood they engendered.

WEEK TWO – MEMORY 2

In Class:

1. Discuss student’s favorite Memory prompt
2. Discuss assigned script (go over script format)
3. Screen a short film (time permitting)

Assignments:

1. *Write / describe a 1 page prose story based on one of the four memories (trip to school, toy, place, person.) Think of it as a five minute non-dialogue idea. Could this be a 507 Project?*
2. *Atmosphere exercise:*

Designed to build the writer's sense of a visually interesting, emotionally evocative location. The goal is to engage the audience without introducing action -- through light, use of sound, and visuals.

In three parts. Length: One paragraph per part. No more than a page total. Make the audience expect something to happen. 1. Horror. 2. Romance. 3. Comedy.

*Pick a cinematic location. Describe the sights and sounds of that location in order to make the audience think something **romantic** is about to take place. The scene ends when your character enters the location. Repeat with the same location, but use the sights and sounds to make the audience expect something **frightening or violent** is*

*going to take place. As before, the scene ends when the same character enters the scene. Repeat a third time using sights and sounds to make the audience expect something **humorous** is about to happen.*

These scenes and/or moments are not to be connected into a larger story. Time can pass. (A location that is vibrant and full of life can be run-down and old, for example.) Also, the fear or love or laughs should not come from the character's interaction or movement. The goal is to get the audience to expect something will happen. Example: Show the banana peel, but not the man slipping on it.)

WEEK THREE – MEMORY STORY & ATMOSPHERE

In class:

1. Discuss 1 page Memory stories.
2. Read atmosphere exercise, discuss format, description, planting and payoff.

Assignment for next week:

- 1) “Experience” assignment: Choose A or B and write about it.
 - a) *My moment of greatest pride and moment of deepest shame.*
 - b) *My moment of greatest joy and moment of greatest terror.*

Length: 1 page. Prose.

WEEK FOUR - “EXPERIENCE” exercise

Read and discuss “Experience” assignment.

- My moment of greatest pride and moment of deepest shame.
- My moment of greatest joy and moment of greatest terror.

Assignment for next week:

“Preparation For A Date” assignment. Write two short non-dialogue scenes. [In screenplay format. Example: INT. APARTMENT - L.A. – DAY]

Designed to build audience engagement and expectation. Introduces the use of props, costume, and character revealing activity -- but not necessarily dramatic action.

Helps the writer practice time ellipsis, the technique of planting and payoff, and/or repetition with a variation. And of course preparation and aftermath. In two parts. Length: No more than a page total. (First scene = 1/2 page) of “preparation”, second scene (1/3 page) of “aftermath”.

*Pick an interesting character and place him or her in a location significant to that character. (A home, an office, a combat bunker.) Show that character preparing for some character-revealing event, such as a crucial job interview, a murder, a confession, an encounter with aliens. Whatever. The point is to show – through props and movement – not only what the event is, but how the character feels about what's about to happen. This should not be a guessing game. We are not given clues, but glimpses into the character's hopes and fears. It should be crystal clear what the event is when the character leaves the location. Then, ellipse time and show the character's return. **We do not see the primary scene of the event.** But when the character returns to his home, or aircraft hanger, or office... we should know exactly what happened and how the character feels about it by changes in demeanor, costume, props, etc.*

WEEK FIVE - Discuss “Preparation For A Date” exercise.

Read Preparation For A Date.

Assignments for next week:

“True/False” assignment. (Write two small, two paragraph, stories. One is absolutely true. One is absolutely false.

Class tries to determine which one is which and why.

WEEK SIX -- “TRUE/FALSE”

Read “TRUE/FALSE” stories.

Assignment for next week:

“WRONGEST PERSON/INTRUDER”. Dialogue scene.

The "Wrongest" Person/Intruder. A dialogue scene between two characters. Should build and employ many of elements already introduced. Preparation, planting and pay-off, etc. (For some reason, writers tend to forget atmosphere again, like sound and light, to help the audience expect a romantic or violent scene...) Designed to reveal character through conflict, to build suspense through a ticking clock, and to practice

dialogue -- including attitude, vernacular/voice, scene/plot advertising, exposition.

Length: 3 - 5 pages.

Character A prepares some location for character B's arrival, but character C shows up instead! This should be, from what we know of character A and his/her plans, the absolute worst person who could arrive. Character A must get rid of character C before he/she crosses paths with character B! But, character A cannot come out and say exactly why character C must leave. ("Listen mom, you gotta leave because I was about to smoke crack with my favorite girl...". For this to work, the audience must know what is being planned and the stakes involved. (But this cannot be conveyed via dialogue on the phone, answering machine, texted etc.) Also, character C must be entirely motivated to stay. (Mom is sick and took the day off, for example.)

The scene ends immediately when Character B arrives, whether Character A is successful in getting rid of character C, or not.

WEEK SEVEN – WRONGEST PERSON / INTRUDER SCENE

- 1) Read Intruder scenes.

Assignments for next week:

- 1) "SIGNIFICANT OBJECT" Dialogue scene. 3 – 5 pages.

The goal of this scene is to build audience's expectations by using a significant prop. This scene should employ many of the elements practiced so far, including preparation, use of light and sound, manipulating time, motivated opposing characters, suspense and surprise, reversal and character change.

A character prepares for a significant encounter and plans to use a certain object. Because of the conflict with a second (or more) character(s) the prop ends up being used in an entirely different way. (Cheap gift of perfume; a failed apology; the perfume is used as poison, etc.; Hitchcock: A leg of lamb for dinner is used as murder weapon.)

WEEK EIGHT -- "SIGNIFICANT OBJECT" Dialogue scene.

- 1) Discuss Dialogue Scene – SIGNIFICANT OBJECT

Assignment for next week:

Write a two-character "SEDUCTION / PERSUASION" dialogue scene. 3 – 5 pgs.

Two possible scenarios. Choose 1.

- 1) *Character A is trying to seduce or persuade Character B to do something, but Character B doesn't want to. Character A either succeeds or fails.*
- 2) *Both Characters A & B want to be seduced/do the thing in question, but circumstances make it almost impossible to succeed. They either succeed or fail.*

[The goal should be appealing to the person being seduced, but that person should have legitimate, character revealing opposition. This need not be sexual or romantic. The seduction/persuasion should escalate.]

WEEK NINE – “SEDUCTION / PERSUASION” Dialogue scene.

Discuss Seduction / Persuasion scenes.

Assignment for next week:

*Story Ideas: Create an idea for a main character and **short** (5 to 10 minute) **film**. (One page synopsis, three paragraphs (acts).)*

WEEK TEN -- SHORT FILM IDEAS.

Discuss short film synopsis.

Assignments for next week:

*Another Story Idea: Create an idea for a main character and **short** (5 to 10 minute) **film**. (One page synopsis, three paragraphs (acts).)*

WEEK ELEVEN: -- SHORT FILM IDEAS. 508 FACULTY VISIT.

Discuss Short film synopsis.

508 FACULTY VISITS 505 TO DISCUSS PARAMETERS OF CLASS.

Assignment for next week:

Create a list of 5 possible ideas for your Fall 508 film. One sentence written pitch for each but be prepared to expound verbally. (Ideas can be any genre, as well as

documentary or experimental. Remember: 508 script length is 5 pages and is primarily visual, with limited-dialogue.

WEEK TWELVE: CTPR 508 and THE 5 PAGE SHORT SCRIPT

Pitch 508 project ideas.

Assignment for next week:

*Choose **one** 508 idea and write it up as a 5 page screenplay. (508 narratives should have a maximum of 2 pages dialogue total.)*

DELIVER SCRIPT BY 10AM THE DAY BEFORE CLASS.

WEEK THIRTEEN -- THE 508 SHORT SCRIPT

Discuss 508 script 1.

Assignment:

*Choose **another** idea and write the 5-page script.*

DELIVER SCRIPT BY 10AM THE DAY BEFORE CLASS.

WEEK FOURTEEN -- THE 508 SHORT SCRIPT

- Discuss 508 script 2.

Assignment for next week:

Choose one project and rewrite it.

DELIVER SCRIPT BY 10AM THE DAY BEFORE CLASS.

WEEK FIFTEEN -- THE 508 SHORT SCRIPT. CLASSES END.

- Discuss revised 508 script.

DELIVER SCRIPT BY 10AM THE DAY BEFORE CLASS.

WEEK SIXTEEN -- STUDY DAYS. NO CLASSES.**WEEK SEVENTEEN-- -- DELIVER EXAM / SUMMARY PROJECT TO INSTRUCTOR AND CLASSMATES. NO CLASS.**

[SUMMARY PROJECT = Summarize, analyze and write up strengths and weaknesses of each 508 script. (including your own) One page per project.]

*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/rsyp

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