

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

**CTWR 543: The Character Driven Screenplay
(section 19289R)
Fall 2021**

Instructor:	Robert Ramsey
Class Schedule:	Monday 1-3:50 p.m.
Class Location:	SCA 342
Office Hours:	By Appointment
Email:	robertra@usc.edu
Cell:	323-394-9471

Course Objective:

Students will develop and write the first draft of a screenplay with an emphasis on character as story engine.

Course Description:

The character-driven screenplay is distinguished by a singular protagonist whose strong intentions determine the plot of the film. “Lady Bird” by Greta Gerwig and “Eighth Grade” by Bo Burnham are two recent and excellent examples of the form. Both feature a young female protagonist whose uniquely personal choices form the backbone of the narrative as she negotiates a universally familiar setting and situation. In “Lady Bird,” the titular character is a high school senior yearning to escape the small town torpor of Sacramento and manifest her vague literary/artistic dreams by applying to elite (and expensive) liberal arts colleges on the East Coast, which brings her into direct conflict with her own mother’s closely-held middle-class fears and insecurities. Similarly, in “Eighth Grade,” Kayla is the shy protagonist impatiently dreaming of a more confident and “cool” future, lurking palpably somewhere just beyond her reach, as she bravely attempts to overcome her introverted tendencies during the last week of eighth grade.

Both films depict powerful emotional journeys that culminated with remarkable intensity, yet each possess a subtly crafted plot that the casual viewer would be hard-pressed to describe. That difficult-to-describe quality is something many character-driven films have in common, primarily because the main action of the character-driven screenplay frequently occurs within the protagonist’s head, thus presenting unique dramatic challenges to the screenwriter whose primary purpose is to tell a story as visually as possible.

This course will embrace and emphasize the three-act, eight sequence approach to plotting and drafting a feature script. With the intention of defining terms and establishing reference points, we will begin with a character and structural analysis of “The Descendants.” In subsequent classes, students will develop and present ideas, expand them into detailed outlines and then draft and present their screenplays sequence by sequence in a collaborative and supportive workshop environment. The final assignment will be a strategic polish based on specific notes and feedback.

Course Reading:

T.B.D.

Grading Criteria:

Participation:	10%
Pitch:	10%
Outline:	20%
Draft:	30%
Polish:	20%

	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%

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 will be used in class for ASSIGNMENT WORK ONLY! Cell phones should be muted and stowed away.

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.

Class Schedule:

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

Week 1 (Aug. 23): Examination of “A Single Man” first sequence as a means of discussing character-driven narratives. Review of eight sequence, three-act structure. Discussion of what makes a strong feature pitch.

Assignment: Prepare a pitch for your feature, with an emphasis on your protagonist’s wants and needs.

Week 2 (Aug. 30): Each student pitches their story, followed by class discussion. Split into Groups A and B.

Assignment: Write 6-10 page outline with sequence and act breaks. Three acts, eight sequences.

Week 3 (Sept. 6) : LABOR DAY (no class)

Week 4 (Sept. 13): Group A presents outlines.

Week 5 (Sept. 20): Group B presents outlines.

Week 6 (Sept. 27): Group A presents First Sequences.

Week 7 (Oct. 4): Group B presents First Sequences.

Week 8 (Oct 11): Group A presents Second Sequences.

Week 9 (Oct. 18): Group B presents Second Sequences.

Week 10 (Oct. 25): Group A presents Third and Fourth Sequences (to midpoint).

Week 11 (Nov. 1): Group B presents Third and Fourth Sequences (to midpoint).

Week 12 (Nov. 8): Group A presents Fifth and Sixth Sequences (to the second act curtain).

Week 13 (Nov. 15): Group B presents Fifth and Sixth Sequences (to the second act curtain).

Week 14 (Nov. 22): Group A presents Seventh and Eighth Sequences. Discuss polish strategy.

Week 15 (Nov. 29): Group B presents Seventh and Eighth Sequences. Discuss polish strategy.

Finals Week: Final Polishes due **Friday, Dec. 10**

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**