

School of Cinematic Arts
The John Wells Division of Writing for Screen and Television
CTWR 409: “Fundamentals of Screenwriting: Character, Conflict, & Story”
Fall 2021 – 4 units

Instructor: Ivy Pruss
Class Schedule: Monday, 4-6:50pm
Class Location: SCA 362
Office Hours: Friday, 1-3pm (by
appointment on zoom)
Contact Information: ivy.pruss@gmail.com

Course Goals:

To identify your unique voice and learn professional approaches to writing a feature screenplay. The primary goal of the course will be to learn strategies and tools for writing compelling characters in conflict-driven scenes through scene assignments, character packets, and lectures on structure and world-building. In addition, students will have their writing workshopped and will have the opportunity to practice giving constructive feedback to each other. Due to the sensitive nature of writing as an act of self-expression, students will also have an opportunity to show respect for differences, be generous with the benefit of the doubt, and demonstrate good listening, both when receiving feedback and when giving notes on the personal material that inevitably goes into crafting memorable characters with strong points of view. The culmination in this class will be a feature outline (15-20 pages) and the first act of the script (25-30 pages).

Course Reading:

The single most important thing you can do to grow as a writer, in addition to writing consistently, is to read as many screenplays as possible and stay current on what is being produced. Below is a list of scripts that illuminate different concepts that will be covered in class, but you are encouraged to seek out and read other scripts as well. Please read scripts!

Textbook:

The Tools of Screenwriting by David Howard and Edward Mabley

Suggested Screenplays (provided on Blackboard):

“The Danish Girl” by Lucinda Coxon
“Black Panther” by Ryan Coogler & Joe Robert Cole
“Erin Brockovich” by Susannah Grant
“The Big Sick” by Emily V. Gordon & Kumail Nanjiani
“Gravity” by Alfonso Cuarón & Jonás Cuarón
“Sideways” by Alexander Payne

Films to Watch (REQUIRED, available to rent on Amazon Prime):

“Zola” by Janicza Bravo and Jeremy O. Harris

*Note: Instructor may assign additional films to screen as more guest speakers are confirmed.

Class Schedule:

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

8/23, Week 1: Fundamentals of Screenwriting

- Syllabus Review and Student Intros
- Lecture: Fundamentals of screenwriting: use of present tense, economy of language, a script is a “living blueprint” of what we will see and hear on screen
- Discussion: strategies for discovering your voice and review of goals for assignment #1
- Reading: The Tools of Screenwriting – Basic Storytelling, pg 19-40
- **ASSIGNMENT #1: “general meeting”:** pitch yourself in 5 minutes, due IN CLASS on 8/30

8/30, Week 2: Characters

- Student presentations of Assignment #1 in class
- Lecture: What makes a compelling character? Main vs supporting; character is more than biography; character is revealed through DIALOGUE and POINT OF VIEW about lived experiences; character is revealed in plot through ACTIVE CHOICES; character can also be revealed using PROPS, COSTUMES, and WORLD-BUILDING
- **ASSIGNMENT #2: Character Packets (using the Frank Daniel handout on Blackboard), due VIA EMAIL FRIDAY, 9/10 @1PM**

9/6, Week 3: NO CLASS, LABOR DAY

9/13, Week 4: Conflict

- Discussion: Character Packets
- Lecture: what is conflict and how does it create a story? Conflict is more than disagreement. Essential elements of a logline. The summary is the emotional journey of the character as revealed through plot. Relationship between Genre and Concept.
- Sample loglines presented in class; in-class practice writing a logline
- **ASSIGNMENT #3: using the feedback from you character packets, please write a one-sentence logline and short summary of the feature you would like to write (1 page max, can be one paragraph if it has a clear arc and a beginning, middle, and end) due in class on 9/13. Please ALSO email a copy to the instructor before the start of class.**

9/20, Week 5: Screenplay Structure

- Presentation of Loglines and Pitches; greenlit pitches will be assigned to **Group 1**
- Lecture: Overview of screenplay structure. A feature is typically 8 sequences in 3 acts. Topics include want/need, status quo, the inciting incident, emotional arcs vs. plot, exposition, narrative tension: each sequences asks and answers a question that advances the character’s emotional journey.
- Discussion: writing screenplay coverage, and how scripts are evaluated in the marketplace
- Reading: The Tools of Screenwriting – Film Analysis, selected from pages 114-274
- **ASSIGNMENT #4: screenplay analysis; pick a feature script from the options on Blackboard, read it, and write industry-standard coverage (template and sample coverage will be provided on blackboard), due VIA EMAIL FRIDAY @1PM**

9/27, Week 6: Introduction to Scene Writing and Workshop Expectations

- Presentation of Loglines and Pitches; greenlit pitches will be assigned to **Group 2**
- Discussion: Workshop expectations and etiquette; Criticism vs. Constructive Pitches; the importance of collaboration and being helpful and generous, listening vs. reacting.
- Elements of a good pitch: fertile/generative (it makes things happen to progress the plot or reveal character), organic to the world, consistent in tone, genre, size and scope.
- Overview of scene length guidelines for writing exercises, and discussion of writing for production. NOTE: A scene for our purposes is typically 1-2 pages in length (brief overview of how the A.D. breaks down the pages of a script into 1/8s for the shooting schedule)
- **ASSIGNMENT #5 “Fan Fiction”**: using either the script from Assignment #4, or another recently produced screenplay similar to the script you want to write (subject to approval, email me the title of your selection). Watch the film and read the script, paying special attention to the way it was written (format and style – what was on the page that reached the screen?) Find a place somewhere in the script and continue the story in a different direction, using the original characters and mimicking the writer’s style, for two to four scenes (2-5 pages). Due via email by Friday @ 1PM

10/4, Week 7: Atmosphere and World-Building

- Presentation of Loglines and Pitches; greenlit pitches will be assigned to **Group 3**
- Workshop Fan Fiction Scenes
- Lecture: Atmosphere and World-Building across genres
- **ASSIGNMENT #6 “Preparation for a Date”**: Write two short non-dialogue scenes in screenplay format. Pick an interesting character and place them in a significant location. (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. Due via email by Friday @ 1PM

10/11, Week 8: Keeping the Audience Engaged

- Workshop Scene Writing Exercises
- MID-TERM EVALUATIONS to be completed in class
- Lecture: Preparation and Aftermath, Planting and Payoff, Elements of the Future, and Advertising
- **ASSIGNMENT #7 “The Intruder”**: Two characters. Suggested length: 2-5 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. 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. The scene ends immediately when Character B arrives, whether Character A is successful in getting rid of character C, or not. Due via email by Friday @ 1PM

10/18, Week 9: Dialogue

- Workshop Scene Writing Exercises
- In-class reading on three-dimensionality from Elaine Scarry's "The Body in Pain"
- Lecture: Creating unique dialogue with authenticity; difference between dialect and voice; dialect reflects class, culture/regionalism, and time period; voice reflects both dialect and point of view; the importance of three-dimensionality and using reflections of world-building and atmosphere in dialogue to bring characters to life
- **ASSINGMENT: Group 1 Feature Outlines due via email by Friday @ 1PM**

10/25, Week 10: Tension and Polarity

- Workshop GROUP 1 Outlines
- Lecture: how to create and sustain tension in a feature film; different strategies: "Two truths," "peeling back layers," and "climbing the mountain"; discussion of polarity and how it is used to create memorable entrances and exits
- **ASSIGNMENT: Group 2 Feature Outlines due via email by Friday @ 1PM**

11/1, Week 11: Rewriting

- Workshop GROUP 2 Outlines
- Lecture: considerations for rewriting; dynamic writing and "three things in a scene";
- **ASSIGNMENT: Group 3 Feature Outlines due via email by Friday @ 1PM**
- **ASSIGNMENT: Rewrite either your "Intruder" Scene Assignment based on class feedback, OR rewrite your "Preparation for a Date" assignment by adding dialogue and building out the scenes. Due via email by Friday @ 1PM**

11/8, Week 12: Rewriting, Part 2

- Workshop GROUP 3 Outlines
- Lecture: Rewriting based on latent themes and emotional dynamics between characters
- To Watch for 11/15: "Zola" by Janicza Bravo and Jeremy O. Harris
- **ASSIGNMENT: Group 1 Act One first draft due via email by Friday @ 1PM**

11/15, Week 13: Workshop

- Workshop Act One: GROUP 1
- Guest Speaker: Shahrzad Davani (producer/writer/director, 1st A.D. on "Zola")
- **ASSIGNMENT: Group 2 Act One first draft due via email by Friday @ 1PM**

11/22, Week 14: Workshop

- Workshop Act One: GROUP 2
- **ASSIGNMENT: Group 3 Act One first draft due via email by Friday @ 1PM**

11/29, Week 15: Workshop

- Workshop Act One: GROUP 3
- **CLASS EVALUATIONS TO BE COMPLETED ONLINE**
- **FINAL ASSIGNMENT: Your class portfolio will be a REVISED OUTLINE and REVISED ACT ONE due via email by Friday, December 3 @ 1PM.**

Grading Criteria:

Your grade will be based upon your thoughtful PARTICIPATION (20%), completed ASSIGNMENTS 1-7 (35%), completed first draft OUTLINE (10%), completed first draft of ACT ONE (15%), and the completion and quality of your FINAL PORTFOLIO (20%). Please note that although you will be given feedback on all assignments, much of the work in this class will be producing first drafts. These will be graded for completion. Your grade is weighted heavily toward the two most important elements of success: effort and showing up. Your final portfolio will be evaluated on both completion and mastery of course concepts.

Unless otherwise specified, students will turn in assignments no later than **1PM ON FRIDAY** as a PDF to ivy.pruss@gmail.com. Assignments must be turned in on time to be eligible for workshop in class. Late work will not be workshopped and this will affect your participation grade. In addition to engaging in class, your participation grade includes meeting deadlines and being on time returning from breaks. There will be two ten-minute breaks per class, at 4:50pm and 5:50pm. Returning late from breaks will affect your participation grade.

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

Writing Division Attendance Policy:

CTWR 409 only meets once a week and attendance is a vital component for your success. As outlined above, students are expected to be on time, prepared for each class, and meet professional standards.

Official department policy states that students are **allowed two absences** throughout the semester. **On the third absence**, students will have their final grade lowered by 10% and an additional 10% for each absence thereafter. Two late arrivals equates to one full absence. Exceptions will be made in the case of religious holidays and DSP accommodations.

PLEASE NOTE: I will do my best to strike a balance between the department policies and the reality that we are living in an ongoing pandemic. The return to campus will undoubtedly be challenging in unforeseen ways. **The single most important thing we can all do this semester is keep ourselves and each other safe.** This will be true in your careers should you go on to work on professional sets, and it is true in this class. If you are ill, **PLEASE STAY HOME.** Even if you are concerned about your grade being lowered due to the department's attendance policy, please **DO NOT** come to class if you are ill. One of the best things you can learn as future members of the filmmaking community, when faced with competing pressures and priorities, is to put the safety of yourselves and others first, even if you are concerned it may come at a personal cost. I will do my very best to provide flexibility and help you master the material of the class, and I would strongly encourage you all to make the collective well-being of this group the top priority this semester. One way or another, I will help everyone who is motivated to do so find a way to get the work done and succeed in this class.

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.

Please be aware 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.

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-](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support)

[response-support](http://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.

PLEASE NOTE:

FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX