

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
CTWR 514B: Basic Dramatic Screenwriting
January 11 – April 26, 2022

Instructor: Ligiah Villalobos Spring, 2022
Office Hours: Tuesdays 5-6:00pm (by appt.) Class: Tuesdays 6-8:50pm
Contact Info: ligiahv@usc.edu Classroom: #345 (and on ZOOM)
310-569-8671 (cell) Section: 19237

ZOOM INFO:

<https://usc.zoom.us/j/97963480125?pwd=QytnbU1GQjRaUEhIV2wzWnFDVW5IZz09>

Meeting ID: 979 6348 0125

Passcode: or4t8S7NX7

COURSE GOALS:

- Expand the process first presented in 514a of developing an idea into a feature screenplay.
- Create unique characters with strong inner lives and complex relationships.
- Establish a clear personal connection in order to drive and enliven the story.
- Deepen understanding of narrative cinematic techniques and structure established in earlier courses.
- Acquire command of format, visual writing style, and dialogue.
- Remove the inhibiting sense of preciousness while learning to make decisions and work fast, always with the knowledge and plan that rewriting will follow.

COURSE OBJECTIVE:

The objective of this course is to build on the skills you acquired in Screenwriting Fundamentals and Intermediate Screenwriting by completing a feature outline and a feature screenplay with some revisions. Last semester you utilized your intuitive skills to write your first feature, this semester you will develop a more conscious, professional approach to screenwriting. We will slow down the process as a way to concentrate on the techniques you are learning in 516; we will focus on how those techniques can help you to tell your story more effectively.

Please keep in mind that this is a learning experience, not a thesis class, and that the emphasis will be on the process. If your outline and your screenplay turn out great that's terrific, but our goal is for you to absorb the fundamentals of feature screenwriting and the methods by which you can put those fundamentals to use.

Since we will be emphasizing specific screenwriting methods, your work in 516 is closely related to our work in 514B. With that in mind, we will sometimes supplement our own discussion by talking about the films you are watching and the concepts you are learning in 516, and discuss how that knowledge can be helpful to your own writing.

We will begin with the ideation process, the time when the writer will explore the possibilities of his or her stories and characters. Students will be expected to explore two feature ideas in the first couple of weeks.

Once you've chosen your story we will move on to the work of creating compelling characters to bring this story to life. We will be writing biographies: creating histories for your characters defining their motivations, hopes and fears. You will be challenged to make your characters fresh and original by using your own experience.

The second stage of our class will be writing the step outline or treatment. Character and story structure will be explored. We will discuss the manner in which you tell the story. How is the character introduced? What is his/her defining scene? When is the main tension clear? And what is the central question of the story? Then, what are the obstacles that frustrate your character in their journey? How do they find the courage to continue? Who is on their side and who is against them? What is their lowest point and what is their most brilliant moment in the story? Finally, how does your story resolve and what does that resolution have to say about your view of the world? We will attempt to 'see' the movie in its entirety. This is our chance to make the story work: to play with the order of scenes, of revelation and recognition, of heightening the tension and making the resolution satisfying. At the end of this section of the class you will have written a 10 -20 page step outline in which every dramatic scene in the movie is described.

Finally, you will write the first draft. First drafts should be written quickly and in a burst of enthusiasm and emotion. Use your outline to guide you, but let the story take you over. Let your characters speak and act. We will be reviewing the lessons of 513: how to tell a story visually, how to make your scenes rich with character, action and drama, how to make the dialogue surprising, clear and effective. Along the way you will be getting notes from your classmates; I expect you to address some of these notes along the way but the bigger changes should be implemented toward the end of the semester.

Your final portfolio will be: character biographies with a central main character, the step outline, and the first draft (90-120 pages) of your script.

The class is a seminar and you will be expected to read and give feedback on the material of your classmates. The collaborative process is central to writing for film and television and is an integral part of the 514B experience.

I recognize that every writer's method is unique to them, and that you are in the process of developing your own method, if you haven't developed it already. However, in this class you will be following the approach and the timetable below as we believe this is the best way to teach you.

ASSIGNMENTS:

In this class, students will get feedback and address notes from their professor and their classmates. The feedback may be both written and verbal and it is designed to not only

hear how others feel about each individual's storytelling skills, but to learn and experience what others do well.

Note: Writing assignments and written notes for and from classmates will be due to them and your professor VIA EMAIL no later than 10:00am on MONDAY MORNING each week.

In emails, all assigned scenes and acts should be clearly marked (your name and what assignment you're sending. For example: Villalobos – Act I). Late assignments will not be accepted unless you have previously discussed it with your professor.

REQUIRED READING:

There will be various handouts to help in the development of your specific pilot and multiple screenplays that reflect various elements of writing.

SCRIPT FORMAT:

All scripts must be written in "Final Draft." Laptops are required in this class.

CLASS SCHEDULE: Please note that weekly schedule and assignments are subject to change at the discretion of the professor.

Week 1 – January 11: Student introductions, class summary and requirements, general discussion about what makes a good feature film/ a good story

In Class Discussion

Go over syllabus.

Students briefly pitch two screenplay ideas.

Discuss "The 1-3-10 Sentence Structure."

Discuss the difference between a good story and a good film, the concept of "Show me, don't tell me." And, does your story have enough legs to sustain a second act?

Assignment #1

Write a one-page pitch for **two ideas** you have for your screenplay.

Email professor/classmates a copy of your assignment by 10:00am on Monday.

Week 2 – January 18: Theme

In Class Discussion

Plots vs. Theme. The importance of not only being clear about your story, but also clear about what you want to say – what you want to explore.

What is the theme (or themes) that you're exploring in your two ideas?

What is the main character's conflict in the story?

Do both ideas have strong themes and a strong lead character (or characters)?

Workshop

Discuss one-page pitches. Be prepared to give verbal feedback.

Assignment #2

With professor and classmates' input, expand on the pitch for both ideas into a 2-3 page summary of your story, keeping in mind the main character's (or

characters') CONFLICT and adding more specificity to your THEME(S).
Email professor/classmates a copy of your assignment by 10:00am on Monday.

Week 3 – January 25: Characters

In Class Discussion

Establishing main character(s)'s essential wants/needs. What makes characters unique, rich, multi-dimensional, and/or believable even in unbelievable worlds?

Handout – “Characters – Hooking an Audience” and “Character Breakdown.” A sample of a character's biography.

Workshop

Discuss expanded pitches. Be prepared to give verbal feedback.

With classmates and your professor's input, choose which one of the two stories you will be working on.

Assignment #3

Write character biographies for all of your main characters.

Optional Reading – “Minari” screenplay. Pay attention to specificity of characters.

Email professor/classmates a copy of your assignment by 10:00am on Monday.

Week 4 – February 1: Establishing Worlds and The Beat Sheet

In Class Discussion

Creating a believable, dimensional world is critical to a good film. Does your script create a plausible world with organic characters, a clear geography, and defined rules?

What is a beat sheet and how to break down your story into beats.

Handout – “Tips on World-Building for Writers.” Twitter Thread from Javier Grillo. Beat Sheet Template.

Workshop

Discuss character biographies.

Assignment #4

Write a one-page/paragraph describing the world of your film.

Write your Beat Sheet.

Revise character biographies, based on notes given in class.

Optional Reading – “Dune” screenplay.

Email professor/classmates a copy of your assignment by 10:00am on Monday.

Week 5 – February 8: Escalating Dramatic Stakes, and the Outline

In Class Discussion

How to build conflict and drama from scene to scene and from act to act.

Turning your Beat Sheet into an Outline.

Handouts

“Dramatic Writing Checklist.”

“Must Read Analogy ‘Raising the Stakes’ in Screenplays.”

“How to Write a Script Outline: the 8 Major Plot Points.”

Samples of feature outlines.

Workshop

Discuss Beat Sheets. Receive and give notes.

Assignment #5

Write first half of your outline (up to the mid-point in Act II), 5-10 pages.

Optional Reading – “Parasite.”

Email professor/classmates a copy of your assignment by 10:00am on Monday.

Week 6 – February 15: Tone**In Class Discussion**

Keeping the tone consistent in the story and with your characters. Discuss and define your screenplay’s tone. Based on the working outline, does it hit the intended mark? If not, how/where could it be strengthened in the outline?

Workshop

Discuss first half of the outlines. Receive and give notes.

Assignment #6

Write last half of your outline (from the mid-point to end of Act III), 5-10 pages.

Email professor/classmates a copy of your assignment by 10:00am on Monday.

Week 7 – February 22: The Importance of Breaking Tension**In Class Discussion**

How humor can work to your advantage when writing dramatic stories and how slowing down the action can give relief to the audience.

Workshop

Discuss last half of the outlines. Receive and give notes.

Assignment #7

Write first half of Act I of your screenplay (10-15 pages).

Optional Reading – “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri.” What was used to break tension?

Email professor/classmates a copy of your assignment by 10:00am on Monday.

Week 8 – March 1: Scenes**In Class Discussion**

What makes a good scene – come in late, leave early, escalation of the scene, the “Essence Line,” etc.

Handouts – “Scenes – Basic Rules.”**Workshop**

Discuss first half of Act I of each screenplay. Receive and give notes.

Assignment #8

Write second half of Act I of your screenplay (10-15 pages).

Email professor/classmates a copy of your assignment by 10:00am on Monday.

Week 9 – March 8: Dialogue**In Class Discussion**

Making your dialogue believable, organic, and not stilted. How can it sound more spoken than written?

Handouts

“Creating Incredible Dialogue.”

“6 Insanely Good Dialogue Tips...”

“Your Guide to Writing Better Dialogue.”

Workshop

Discuss second half of Act I of each screenplay. Receive and give notes

Assignment #9

Begin Act II, of your screenplay – Part I of IV (10-15 pages).

Optional Reading – “The Trial of the Chicago Seven.” What makes Aaron Sorkin’s dialogue so unique/distinctive?

Email professor/classmates a copy of your assignment by 10:00am on Monday.

W/O 3/14 – SPRING BREAK

Week 10 – March 22: Sustaining a Second Act

In Class Discussion

How do you keep your second act interesting and active.

Workshop

Discuss Part I of Act II of each script. Give and receive notes.

Assignment #10

Continue Act II, of your screenplay – Part II of IV (10-15 pages).

Optional Reading – “The White Tiger.” What were some of the themes explored?

Email professor/classmates a copy of your assignment by 10:00am on Monday.

Week 11 – March 29: Ensemble Casts and Supporting Characters

In Class Discussion

Giving characters specificity in ensemble casts, and the importance of supporting characters in the development of multiple stories in a film.

Workshop

Discuss Part II of Act II of each script. Give and receive notes.

Assignment #11

Continue Act II of your screenplay – Part III of IV (10-15 pages).

Optional Reading – “One Night in Miami.” Did characters have specificity?

Email professor/classmates a copy of your assignment by 10:00am on Monday.

Week 12 – April 5: Female Characters

In Class Discussion

Female characters don’t have to be likeable, but they *should* be three-dimensional.

Handouts

FiveThirtyEight’s “Creating the Next Bechdel Test.” “Writing Women Characters.” “SeeHer” One-Sheet.

Workshop

Discuss Part III of Act II of each script. Give and receive notes.

Assignment #12

Finish Act II of your screenplay – Part IV (10-15 pages).

Optional Reading – “Promising Young Woman.” Was lead three-dimensional?

Email professor/classmates a copy of your assignment by 10:00am on Monday.

Week 13 – April 12: High Concept and Genre Films

In Class Discussion – Developing high concept and genre films – Sci-Fi, Horror, Fantasy, etc., from books, comic books, graphic novels, toys, etc.

Handout – “Cracking the High Concept Code.” – “Movie Genres Chart.”

Workshop

Discuss Part IV of Act II of each script. Give and receive notes.

Assignment #13

Write first half of Act III of your screenplay (10-15 pages).

Optional Reading – “Get Out” and “The Shape of Water.”

Email professor/classmates a copy of your assignment by 10:00am on Monday.

Week 14 – April 19: Adaptations, True Life Stories and the Importance of Research

In Class Discussion – Adapting true-life stories, books, plays, etc. Why is research necessary in both fiction and true-life stories. What kind of research have you done in your own story/screenplay?

Workshop

Discuss first half of Act III of each script. Give and receive notes.

Assignment #14

Finish Act III of your screenplay (10-15 pages).

Optional Reading – “King Richard.”

Email professor/classmates a copy of your assignment by 10:00am on Monday.

Week 15 – April 26: Writing Ethnic & Diverse Characters, Strong Endings, Q&A and Summary

In Class Discussion – Things to consider when writing diverse characters. And, the importance of a strong Act III.

Handout – Multiple TTIE Fact Sheets.

Workshop

Discuss last half of Act III of each script. Give and receive notes.

Assignment #15

Re-write Act I, or one-half of Act II, or Act III, or a series of scenes you’ve struggled with (no more than 25-30 pgs).

Email professor by Tuesday of Finals Week.

OFFICE HOURS ZOOM LINK:

<https://usc.zoom.us/j/96023395907?pwd=WG5LcXgydkx1RmMybm85dzdGL3Zldz09>

Meeting ID: 960 2339 5907

Passcode: 584819

COURSE EXPECTATIONS

The demands of this graduate program require that all submitted course assignments adhere to correct English language spelling and grammatical rules.

Assignments with any spelling and/or grammatical errors will impact your final grade. I am not here to teach you how to write English and/or in English, I am here to teach you how to write scripts. So...

— PAY ATTENTION TO CORRECT SPELLING AND PUNCTUATION —

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Evaluation Criteria:

CTWR 514B grades will be based on careful consideration in the following areas of the students' work:

1. The ability to keep up with the writing required in the course's schedule.
2. Demonstrated understanding of the fundamental principles of a good story: character, tension, and movement.
3. Demonstrated understanding of the fundamental principles of a good script: character, visualization, scene, dialogue.
4. The ability to develop a professional outline and a feature script with revisions.

Grading Breakdown:

CTWR 514B grades are based on the quality of the writing – as follows:

Character Work	15%
Step Outline	30%
First Draft	45%
Participation	10%

As per writing policy the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:

A	91 to 100%	C	71% to 74%
A-	88% to 90%	C-	68% to 70%
B+	85% to 87%	D+	65% to 67%
B	81% to 84%	D	61% to 64%
B-	78% to 80%	D-	58% to 60%
C+	75% to 77%	F	0 to 59%

Writing Division Attendance Policy:

Class attendance is mandatory and students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Tardiness is unprofessional and will hold up the business of the class. Please make your best effort to be on time.

If you have a conflict that will cause you to miss class, you need to secure the instructor's approval of that absence in advance of the class. 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. In addition, due to

current Covid protocols, if you are feeling ill, without time to test before class, please notify your instructor, do not attend class and get a test. If you test positive, inform your instructor and quarantine for the Health Department's designated period of time.

If you miss class without informing your instructor, it will be considered an unexcused absence. Unexcused absences can lower your final grade for the course. 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.

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.

Laptop and Cellphone Policy:

Students will need a laptop/computer. However, internet usage during class is not allowed, unless it is to look up information we may be discussing in class. Cellphone use is not allowed except during breaks. If any person is found using the device to anything besides class work, they will be asked to leave the class.

Netiquette

During classes that will be held on ZOOM, the dynamics are substantially compromised without the ability to see the people in class; therefore, the default is that students have their cameras on during synchronous online sessions. Those facing challenging situations, such as internet connectivity, illness, or home environments that make this difficult or impossible shall contact me to work out accommodations. I encourage you to use virtual backgrounds, and earphones or headsets, should your home environment benefit from these privacies.

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

Students are not permitted to create their own class recordings without the instructor's permission. Violations of these policies will be met with the appropriate disciplinary sanction.

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 **(does not apply to this class)**

- If you have a question for the DAs during the lecture, use the Chat function. (The DA will direct the professor's 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 hand will appear so that the DA knows you want to speak. The DA will get the professor's attention. Don't unmute until called on. • Professor answers questions in the fifteen minutes before and after the live lecture.

Posting in Forums **(does not apply to this class)**

- 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 and one DA. Professor will be joining discussions as well.

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" <https://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, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Support Systems:

Student Health Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 - 24/7 on call

<https://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

<https://policy.usc.edu/student-health-leave-absence/>

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

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255 - 24-7 On-Call

<http://www.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

<https://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 Compliance - (213) 740-5086

<https://equity.usc.edu>, <https://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

<https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response.

The Office of Disability Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776

<http://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

<https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic.

Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101

<https://diversity.usc.edu/>

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency Information - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 - 24/7 on call

<http://emergency.usc.edu>

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible,

USC Department of Public Safety - 213-740-4321 (UPC) and 323-442-1000 (HSC) for 24-hour on-call

<http://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.

Note: The statement below does not apply on ZOOM. You can eat during class, as long as it is not disruptive and you can still participate fully in discussions (so, mute yourself while eating).

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