

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
The John Wells Division of Writing for Screen and Television
CTWR 409: Fundamentals of Screenwriting: Character, Conflict, & Story
Fall 2022
4 units

Instructor: Erick Castrillon
Class Schedule: Mondays, 4-7pm
Class Location: SCA 362
Office Hours: By appointment
Contact Information: ecastril@usc.edu

"The writing became so fluid that I sometimes felt as if I were writing for the sheer pleasure of telling a story, which may be the human condition that most resembles levitation."

– Gabriel García Márquez

"Every painter paints the cosmogony of himself."

– Salvador Dalí

"Is my responsibility first and foremost to tell the truth? Or is it to my family, which is to protect them? Sometimes I couldn't do both."

– Lulu Wang

Course Objective:

To learn the professional approach of writing relatable characters, in conflict driven scenes, with your authentic voice. In addition, students will learn the 3-act structure and how to create a compelling world. The culmination in this class will be the first act of a feature script.

Course Description:

As an introductory course for non-majors, "Fundamentals of Screenwriting" will focus on developing your resources as a storyteller and cultivating your ability to create and develop compelling dramatic characters with cinematic conflict. Students will explore the mechanics of scene work, how to create character arcs, and the 3-act structure. Through scene work, character work, and story development, students will learn the tools of crafting professional scenes. The culmination of this course will be the first act of an original feature script of 25-30 pages.

Course Reading:

Book:

The Tools of Screenwriting by David Howard and Edward Mabley

Screenplays:

Little Miss Sunshine by Michael Arndt
American Beauty by Allan Ball
Blast Beat by Erick Castrillon and Esteban Arango
Pan's Labyrinth by Guillermo del Toro
The Matrix by The Wachowskis

Additional scripts as assigned by instructor*

*Note: Instructor will assign scripts or films of similar tone to your culminating project.

Grading Criteria:

Students will turn in their work by 1pm on Saturday as a PDF by uploading it to the class GOOGLE DRIVE FOLDER provided by me.

Participation:	10%
Dream Journal	10%
Scene: Atmosphere	5%
Scene: Conflict	5%
Scene: Payoff	5%
Scene: Character	5%
Scene: Dialog	5%
Scene: Rewrite	5%
Character Bios:	10%
Outline:	10%
First Act	30%
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	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%	D-	62% to 60%
		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 assignments 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:

Students are expected to be on time, prepared for each class, and meet professional standards.

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.

NOTE: Exceptions will be made in the case of religious holidays and DSP accommodations.

NOTE: CTWR 409 only meets once a week and attendance is a vital component for your success. 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.

Class Schedule:

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

- Week 1: In class assignment – Core Memory Confession: Recall several important moments in your life. Was this moment traumatic? Embarrassing? Silly? Happy? Exciting? Straight up messed-up?
- Choose one of the events above and recall what led up to this moment.
 - Recall things, places, activities, people, clothes connected with that core moment that changed you. Now briefly share this event in detail with the whole class, allowing yourself to become vulnerable by inhabiting your core memory. (More “telling”, less “reading”)
- In-class screening: selected scenes from “The Matrix” and “Pan’s Labyrinth”
- Reading: selected scenes from “The Matrix” and “Pan’s Labyrinth” on Blackboard
- Assignment #1: Write scene of Atmosphere based on memory exercise (5%)
- Start your daily dream journals
- Week 2: Workshop Scenes of Atmosphere emphasizing conflict that comes from the characters’ emotions.
- Reading: “Blast Beat” on Blackboard
- Assignment #2: Write a scene of direct conflict based on provided prompt (5%)
- Keep up with dream journal entrees
- Week 3: Workshop scenes of Direct Conflict / Utilizing Plant and Payoff in your work to create tension for audiences.
- Screening of Scenes: “Blast Beat”
- Assignment #3: Write a scene using plant and payoff based on provided prompt (5%)
- Keep up with dream journal entrees
- Week 4: Workshop scenes of Plant and Payoff and discuss finding conflict through your location
- Screening: Little Miss Sunshine.
- Reading: Little Miss Sunshine on Black Board
- Assignment #4: Write a character introduction scene (5%)
- Keep up with dream journal entrees

- Week 5: Workshop Character Introduction Scene and discuss how to create unique dialog with authenticity.
Screening: American Beauty
- Reading: American Beauty on Black Board
Assignment #5: Write a scene with authentic dialog (5%)
Keep up with dream journal entrees
- Week 6: Workshop Dialog Scene and discuss the conception of authentic characters
Screening: Selected scenes from Blast Beat.
- Assignment #6: Rewrite a scene focusing on character development (5%)
Keep up with dream journal entrees
- Week 7: Workshop Rewritten Scenes and keep discussing character Development
Screening: Vámonos short film
- Assignment: Choose a character from your previous exercises or a recurring person that appears in your dreams. Now write a 2-page bio of that character (ungraded)
Keep up with dream journal entrees
- Week 8: Review of Character Bio and discuss World-building from Character
Screening: Selected scenes from Pan's Labyrinth
- Assignment: Write a paragraph bio of two important people in that main character's life. You should be one of those important people. Be specific of the role you and that other person play in that character's life and points of conflict.
Keep up with dream journal entrees
Reading: The Tools of Screenwriting – Basic Storytelling, pg 19-40 Character Bio Packet Due by Next Class (10%)
- Week 9: Building your Story from Character and personal emotional landscape and start discussion on how to create a feature outline.
- Read: The Vector on Black Board
Research: Watch assigned films (2) from instructor & Start Outline
Wrap up your dream Journals (10%)
- Week 10: Workshop of Outline of Feature Film and the explore individual artistic voices
- Week 11: Workshop of Outline of Feature Film / Tension
Outline Due (10%)

Assignment: Write first 5 pages of Act One

Reading: The Tools of Screenwriting – Screenwriting Tools, pg 41-95

Note: Workshop will be divided into two groups. Please continue to turn in your assigned pages by the deadline. Folks who need additional time on their outline will be in Group B.

Week 12: Workshop of Feature First Act Group A: Workshop first 5 pages

Group B: Keep writing (Individual Notes from Instructor) Assignment: Write the 10 next pages of Act One

Week 13: Workshop

Group A: Keep writing (Individual Notes from Instructor) Group B: Workshop of first 15 pages of Act One Assignment: Write next 10 pages or til end

Week 14: Workshop

Group A: Workshop of 25 pages of Act One (or til end) Group B: Keep Writing (Individual Notes from Instructor)

Week 15: Individual Meetings with Students to Discuss Act One

Finals Week: **Act One of Feature Script Due (30%)**

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.

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-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**