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

CTWR 100g:  
STORY: CHARACTER, CONFLICT, AND CATHARSIS (4 units)  

Instructor: Jody Wheeler  
Section: 19383D  
Day/Time: Monday 1:00 – 3:50  
Classroom: SCA 362  
Email: josephw9@usc.edu  
Office Hours: By appointment. (In person or Zoom.)  

COURSE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:  
Whether stories come to us in the form of ancient myths, epic poems, medieval fairy tales, plays, classic literature, mass-market fiction, TV shows, or feature films, they speak to our humanity, our fears, our hopes, and our dreams.  

Stories are a means for us to discover, explore, and pass on universal truths, as well as a way for us to learn about ourselves as individuals and in relation to others and to society. Stories tell us who we are, where we’ve been, and where we might go. They connect us to our culture and society, and offer an opportunity for deeper self-reflection about who we are and how we fit into the world around us.  

This course examines how stories accomplish this connectivity, with a specific emphasis on analysis and creation. Both the analysis and the creativity training are geared toward technical facility. We will examine storytelling on both a macro level—cultural, social, political, and religious contexts—and on a micro level—personal and internal motivations, with the goal of applying what we’ve learned to our own work.  

We will focus on the elements of character and story that have been used by storytellers in all cultures to create connectivity with audiences in their own time and through the generations that followed. The objective is to learn how these elements engage an audience and how we can use these elements to tell our own unique stories.  

While Homer’s “The Iliad” and Ben Mezrich and Aaron Sorkin’s “The Social Network” arise from different cultures and epochs, both stories are about how much a person is willing to sacrifice for glory. Both stories examine this universal theme in the context of culture, society, and personal motivation. But though each story is unique—a different vision thematically, a different world, and different answers to the same universal questions about self and society—both use the same elements of character and story to create journeys that engage and move an audience.
These elements of character and story have been used for millennia and they form a universal storytelling language. We will learn this language by focusing on similarities rather than differences first, and then examine what makes a character and story unique. We will examine how connectivity arises from both these similarities and differences, thus developing our ability to analyze creative works.

The objective of this analysis is to learn how to create engaging characters and then put them on a journey worth following—a worthwhile story. We'll learn how to develop characters and their corresponding stories and worlds. The primary focus will be on the elements required to create a living, breathing protagonist and the techniques required to tell his or her story. By learning these elements and techniques, we'll better understand how to develop stories that are both unique and engaging.

To that end, we'll focus on writing exercises specifically designed for screenwriters and storytellers. This will lay the foundation for writing a short screenplay, encompassing the lessons learned over the course of the semester.

**The objectives for this course are to:**

- Understand through analysis and practice the transformational potential of stories.
- Understand through analysis and practice how stories establish a bond with an audience.
- Strengthen our understanding of the connection between stories, culture, and society, and how that connectivity is established.
- Provide a structure and context to exercise both our critical thinking and our imaginations.
- Learn how to create memorable characters who embark on journeys worth following.
- Find personal and emotional connections to our characters and stories.
- Identify and create stories that are compelling.
- Write engaging scenes.
- Create conflict using specific obstacles.
- Build to a cathartic moment.
- Build your character's world and his or her relationship to it.
- Learn the genesis of structure as it arises from your character's story.
- Find and explore theme within your story.
• Pitch your ideas and stories and answer questions about them.

• Develop a short treatment.

• Write, rewrite, and polish a fifteen to thirty page script.

• Learn the process of screenwriting.

ASSIGNMENTS:
In addition to the final script and readings, this course requires weekly writing assignments, which are listed in this syllabus. These weekly assignments will be read in advance of class and some will also be read in class. Assignments are due on Friday nights before 10 p.m.

Assignments turned in late will not be accepted and will receive a failing grade

You’ll be expected to read your classmates’ assignments in advance of class.

You’ll be expected to write notes on those assignments in advance of class.

Plan ahead because you’ll also be expected to share these notes during class, and discuss your classmates’ assignments.

Also, you must be prepared to read your own assignments in class.

At the end of each class, you’ll be given specific guidelines for each assignment listed in the syllabus, so please pay attention.

All assignments must be delivered digitally as PDF files.

REQUIRED READING:
• “The Tools of Screenwriting” by David Howard and Edward Mabley

• “Rewrite 2nd edition: A Step-by-Step Guide to Strengthen Structure, Characters, and Drama in your Screenplay” by Paul Chitlik

• “On Writing” by Stephen King

• “The New Elements of Standard Screenplay Format” by Jean-Paul Oullette Selected scripts

SUGGESTED READING:
"The Elements of Style” by William Strunk & E.B. White
"The Elements of Grammar" by Margaret Shertzer
“The Writer’s Journey” by Christopher Vogler
MOVIES:
Breathing (Atmen) (2011)
https://www.kanopy.com/product/breathing-atmen

The Dark Place (2014)
https://www.amazon.com/Dark-Place-Blaise-Embry/dp/B00PFL8YEI

SOFTWARE:
Final Draft, which has a discount for students.
There is also a free screenwriting software program, Celtx, that can be used once we start outlining. Outlining with these programs enables you to use the same document to write your script later on.

GRADING:
Grades will be based on:

- Participation: 10% (including feedback on your classmates’ work)

- Assignments: 40%

1. Trip To School - 5
2. Memory - 5
3. The Greatest - 5
4. Character Environment - 5
5. Wrong Person - 5
6. Significant Object - 5
7. Creative Lie - 5
8. Seduction / Persuasion - 5

- Script (Drafts of Script and Final Script): 50%

1. Draft of Script - 25
2. Final of Script - 25

Note: This class is 80% of your overall CTWR 100g grade. The Thursday section is 20% of your overall grade.

Your grade will be based upon fulfillment of the weekly assignments, the quality of your final screenplay, and your participation in class.

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As per Writing Division policy the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:
WRITING DIVISION CLASS 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 equal 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.

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.

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.

COVID:
Please follow all USC COVID Policies. If you suspect you are sick, do not come to class. Let me know!
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.

LAPTOP AND CELLPHONES:
Laptops may be used for the purpose of taking notes during workshop. Cell phones should not be used in the classroom.

BLOGGING, PODCASTING, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND RECORDING:
Our class lectures and discussions are considered private communications. Not only will we all be sharing personal stories, but we'll be sharing intellectual property. Therefore, if you have a blog, or podcast, or post about your personal life on social media, anything covered in this class, including lecture material, is considered off limits when it comes to posting on your blog or social media accounts and when it comes to your podcast. And you are not permitted to record lectures or workshop sessions or any of our discussions.

SCHEDULE:

Week One, August 22:
• Class Introductions

• Review syllabus

• In Class Short Video


• In Class Prose Exercise:
  Assignment 1: Character & Emotion, Mining Your Own Experience “Trip To School”

For Next Class:
• Pick two of the three prompts and write a prose piece about each:
  Assignment 2: Memory “Favorite Toy,” “Powerful Presence,” “Frightening Person.”

Week Two, August 29:

• Discuss Screenplay Format

• Discuss Prose Assignment 2
For Next Class:
1) **Assignment 3**: My Moment of Greatest Pride Shame, Guilt, or Embarrassment (Prose)
2) **Assignment 4**: Significant Event
3) Watch *The Dark Place*
4) Read *The Dark Place* Script

**Week Three, September 5:**
Holiday

**Week Four, September 12:**
- The Dark Place Analysis
- Discuss Assignment 3 and 4


For Next Class:
1) Scene of Preparation for A Significant Event & Aftermath (Prose)
2) **Assignment 5**: Character Environment (x3) (Prose)
3) Watch *Atmen*

**Week Five, September 19:**
- Discuss *Atmen*

- Compare and Contrast *Atmen, Dark Place*, and any other film with the basics on story and character we’ve learned about so far.

- Discuss Assignment 5

For Next Class:
**Assignment #6**: Pick either the Wrongest Person/Intruder or Significant Object prompt and write it in Screenplay format

**Week Six, September 26:**
- Topics: Character arc. Conflict. What you must know about every character at the beginning of each scene

- Discuss Assignment #6

For Next Class:
**Assignment #7**: Creative Lie (Screenplay Format)

**Week Seven, October 3:**
• Topics: Only what the audience can see or hear. Reveal character or advance the plot. Come in late and leave early. Parts of a Scene.

• Discuss Assignment #7

For Next Class:
1. Assignment #8: Seduction/Persuasion (Screenplay Format)
2. Two story ideas for your project
3. Read Character Bios From The Dark Place

**Week Eight, October 10:**
No Class / Fall Recess

**Week Nine, October 17:**
Topics: How to write a beat sheet. How to write a treatment.

Pitch Your story idea

Discuss Assignment #8

For Next Week:
• Write bios / character sketch of your protagonist and antagonist
• Watch a short film

**Week Ten, October 24:**
Read and Discuss bios and beat sheets for your script
• Are these characters interesting?
• Do we want to spend time with them?
• Will these characters tell your story and prove your premise?
• Are all of your characters plausible within the genre you’ve chosen?

*Discuss short film vs. feature film*

Assignment:
Write Beat Sheets for your script

**Week Eleven, October 31:**
Read and Discuss Beastsheets

Assignment:
Write First Draft of Script

**Week Twelve, November 7:**
Workshop First Drafts of Scripts pt.1
Week Thirteen, November 14:
Workshop First Draft of Scripts pt. 2

Assignment:
Revise First Draft of Script

Week Fourteen, November 21:
Workshop Revision of Script pt.1

Week Fifteen, November 28:
• Workshop Revision of Script pt. 2
• How to further revise (Review Chitlik Book)
• How to shoot your short
• How to turn your short into a feature

December 9: FINAL DRAFTS OF SCRIPTS ARE DUE AT 12:00 pm.

STATEMENT ON 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 Section 11, Behavior Violating University Standards https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/. 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/.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the Office of Equity and Diversity http://equity.usc.edu/ or to the Department of Public Safety http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. The Center for Women and Men http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/ provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage sarc@usc.edu describes reporting options and other resources.

STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC SUPPORT SYSTEMS:
A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the American Language Institute http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. The Office of Disability Services and Programs http://
sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, USC Emergency Information http://emergency.usc.edu will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

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.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:
Any student requesting academic accommodations based on disability is required to register with Disability Services Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP; please be sure this letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Telephone is (213) 740-0776.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS/COURSE CONTINUITY IN A CRISIS:
In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies.

Please activate your course in Blackboard with access to the course syllabus. Whether or not you use Blackboard regularly, these preparations will be crucial in an emergency. USC's Blackboard learning management system and support information is available at blackboard.usc.edu.

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