

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
Screenwriting 514B – Basic Dramatic Screenwriting
Spring 2019
(Two Units, Required, Section: 19234D)

Instructor: Don Bohlinger
Class Schedule: Tuesday 10-12:50
Class Location: SCA 363
Office Hours: Tuesday 1-4, Monday 1-4, SCA 354, or by appointment
Contact Information: dfb@usc.edu, 323 804-0110

COURSE GOALS:

“The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.”

-- Muriel Rukeyser

"It is the writer who is the dreamer, the imaginer, the shaper. He must generate phantoms out of himself and live with them till they take on a life of their own and become not types, but characters working out their own destinies"

--Dudley Nichols, screenwriter of 'Stagecoach' and 'Bringing Up Baby'.

- Further develop your ability to write feature screenplays
- Expand your understanding of character and character relationships
- Learn to write character biographies and a story outline
- Gain a deeper understanding of story structure
- Utilize and improve upon screenwriting techniques such as visualization and the dramatic scene
- Learn to write from a detailed outline
- Write a professional first draft (with revisions)

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. Whereas last semester you utilized your intuitive skills to write your first feature, this semester you will develop a more conscious, professional approach to screenwriting.

This does not mean formula. Since you will be immersed in the techniques of story structure in 516, the danger is to fall into a “paint by numbers” way of writing your scripts. Don't. While the skills you will acquire in 516 (Feature Script Analysis) are essential to your development as a film or television writer, it is crucial that you continue to utilize your memories and experiences to bring life and meaning to your characters and stories, whatever the genre. It is both your imagination and your technique that will separate you from the pack as a screenwriter.

We will slow down the process to concentrate on the very techniques you are learning in 516 and 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 process, not product. If your outline and your screenplay turn out great that's a bonus, 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 fact 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 pitch two feature ideas in the first two weeks. I would also like you to talk about your favorite feature film of the last year. I want to get a sense of your tastes as a screenwriter as quickly as possible.

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. At the same time, you will also be organizing the general ideas of your story into a first person character description of his/her/their story.

The second stage of our class will be writing the step outline or treatment. Here your work will dovetail nicely with what you are learning in 516. Character and story structure will be discussed. We will discuss the way you tell the story. How is the character introduced? What is his/her defining scene? When is the 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 itself and what does that resolution have to say about your view of the world? In this part of the class, we will work sequence by sequence, presenting groups of scenes to the class. 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 believable. At the end of this section of the class you will have written a 15 - 25-page step outline in which every 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 rich with conflict, 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 for bigger changes this will be done in the two-week revision that will be your final first draft. For me, a *final* first draft is a draft you feel comfortable showing someone. Not a studio or an agent!!! But I am referring to a friend, a colleague or a classmate who knows nothing of the story and who can give you fresh input.

Your final portfolio will be: ten pages of character biographies with a main character narrative, a 15-25 page step outline, and the first draft (90-130 pages) of your script with a revision.

The class is a seminar (our writers' room), 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 described below as this is the best way to teach you. Aside from weekly written and reading assignments, there are two major deadlines and you're expected to meet them.

CLASS SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNMENTS:

Class 1: 1/10

- Discuss class expectations, deadlines, and syllabus.
- First story ideas will be discussed. Why this movie? Why now? What is special about your character.
- Homework: character backstory, description of his/her/their need (reason the story is happening to them) and description of the story from the main character's perspective. Character narrative questions.
- 1-2 pages answering the following questions:
 - Who is your main character? Why are we interested in him/her/them?
 - What is their mystery? Problem? Need?
 - What is their specific goal?
 - How do they develop that goal? How does it grow out of their backstory and opening routine?
 - What is the world of your story? (Location, routine, etc.)
 - (*I believe now I should require a second idea...)

Class 2: 1/17

- Discuss Second ideas (if needed).
- Homework for second idea: character backstory, description of his/her/their need (reason the story is happening to them) and description of the story from the main character's perspective. Character narrative questions.
- Homework: decide on your story.
- Homework: begin deeper character work on main character

Week 3: 1/24

- Discuss character biography work.
- Screen some character defining scenes.
- Deepen character biography. Explore need. Past relationships. Status quo and problem that starts the story.
- Homework: pitch character introduction, describe main the character's routine
- Homework: one page description (1st person) of the character's want

- Homework: answer script/character questions (short version).
- Begin secondary and subplot character work. Why essential and important and indelible.

Week 4: 1/31

- Discuss secondary characters and the main character. Who is on the main character's side and who is against her.
- Discuss the main character's routine.
- Discuss the problem (upset to that routine) that starts the film. Inciting incident/point of attack.
- Discuss the moment the character "want" is clear. Or when the question of the film is clear.
- Homework: start outline – post first acts to google drive for class discussion.
- Homework: antagonist biography (2 pages including backstory)
- Handout: sample step outline.
- Homework: read other your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments.
(*Note: now all work must be emailed by 12 Noon Monday before the next class.)

Week 5: 2/7

- Discuss first act step outline.
- Discuss character introductions, defining scenes, world, routine, point of attack, development of want and a set up of the character's need.
- Do we empathize with the main character and their goal.
- Homework: rewrite existing outline putting in changes
- Homework: third and fourth sequences (to midpoint) are due.
- Homework: read your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments.

Week 6: 2/14

- Discuss third and fourth sequences.
- Discuss character conflict, stakes, subplots and if they are challenging enough to your main character
- Homework: Write fifth and sixth sequence to the end of Act Two.
- Homework: read your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments.

Week 7: 2/21

- Discuss fifth and sixth sequences. Do we have ascending action and increasing tension. Is the character true? Is the subplot coming to a culmination. Is the end of act two a low point or high point for your character?
- Homework: rewrite outline up to this point putting in changes and suggestions that work for you.
- Homework: write the third act your script to the end.
- Homework: write first sequence of second act outline.
- Homework: read your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments.

Week 8: 2/28

- Discuss completed outlines. Did you find your theme? Did the character achieve their want or fulfill their need? Is it satisfying to the audience? Did you wrap up all subplots? Did you provide a twist to test your character's change?
- Homework: finish your outline putting in all your changes and new scenes.
- Homework: Write opening pages and character introduction (first sequence if you have time).
- Homework: read your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments.

Midterm: Submit your completed outlines 3/7 (15-25 pages)

Week 9: 3/7

- Submit final rewritten outline to professor for any last changes or questions.
- Discuss First Scenes – opening, intros..
- Homework for 3/19: Write your first acts.
- Homework: read your fellow writers' first scenes and be ready with comments.

Week 11: 3/14: Spring Recess

Week 12: 3/21

- Discuss first acts.
- Homework: write sequence three.
- Homework: read your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments.

Week 13: 3/28

- Discuss sequence three.
- Homework: put in changes and write sequence four to the midpoint.
- Homework: read your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments.

Week 14: 4/4

- Discuss sequence four.
- Homework: put in changes and write sequence five. Email to class.
- Homework: read your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments.

Week 15: 4/11

- Discuss sequence five.
- Homework: put in changes and write sequence six to end of act two.
- Homework: put in changes and write sequence six.

Week 16: 4/18

- Discuss sequence six.
- Homework: write the final pages of your script (act three). Email to class.
- Homework: read your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments.

Week 17: 4/25

- Discuss Act Three.

- Be prepared to talk about the plan you have for your revision which is the final for this class. (You will not be able to make all of the changes along the way, so you should keep a running list of things you will address during the two weeks before the final project is submitted on May 7th.)
- Homework for final: Revise your script for submission on May 9th.

Last Class Day – April 25

May 9th – first draft of script (with revisions) is due.

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 out line (midterm) and a feature script with revisions.

GRADING WEIGHTS:

CTWR 514B grades are based on:

Quality of writing:

Character Work	10%
Step Outline	25%
First Draft	40%
Revisions	15%
Workshop Prep	10%

Attendance is required. Tardiness will not be tolerated. The class is a workshop (writers' table) so you are expected to read and respond to your fellow writers' work.

LETTER GRADES:

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

Presentation:

As you are hoping to enter the film industry as professionals, I expect your work to be prepared in a professional manner. Screenplay formatting errors, typos, bad spelling or grammar and overall sloppiness are NOT ACCEPTABLE.

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 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.

Classroom Decorum

The professor expects all students to respect and support the ideas and writing of their fellow students. Writing is a fragile process and while we should ask questions, analyze and even challenge, we want to remain supportive, always keeping in mind that the screenplay is fragile work in progress. A working writer needs to develop the art of collaboration while working with their peers. As a working writer you will need to be able to work constructively with directors, producers and studio executives.

Laptop and Texting Policy

Students may use their laptops at the discretion of the professor. Laptops may be used for note taking, but not for surfing the web unless it is part of a class project. Texting is not allowed during class time. Texting is distracting and disruptive. There is nothing that needs to be communicated to anyone except your classmates during class time.

Save your texting and surfing until class break.

Support Systems:

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

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.
<https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>

Sexual Assault Resource Center

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: <http://sarc.usc.edu/>

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086
Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://equity.usc.edu/>

Bias Assessment Response and Support
Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>

The Office of Disability Services and Programs
Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. <http://dsp.usc.edu>

Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710
Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic.
<https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>

Diversity at USC
Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. <https://diversity.usc.edu/>

USC Emergency Information
Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible,
<http://emergency.usc.edu>

USC Department of Public Safety – 213-740-4321 (UPC) and 323-442-1000 (HSC) for 24-hour emergency assistance or to report a crime.
Provides overall safety to USC community. <http://dps.usc.edu>

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