

**USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS**  
CTWR 250: BREAKING THE STORY  
Spring 2023 Section number 19358D  
Wednesdays, 10-12:50pm SCA 362

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**CLASS OBJECTIVE:** A successful screenwriting career is built on the craft of storytelling which in turn depends on the writer's ability to generate and elaborate upon worthwhile ideas. This course is designed to help you develop your skills by approaching story ideation and creation from a variety of angles and by assisting you in developing your own personal process for "finding" ideas and stories. By the end of the semester you will create and develop several feature and series ideas and collect them in a well-organized portfolio. In the future you will have a chance to develop some of the material generated in this class further, both in subsequent classes in the School of Cinematic Arts and as you pursue your profession as a screenwriter in any media.

**CLASS GOALS:**

- To learn how to develop compelling characters, the source of all stories.
- To explore and develop the story-breaking process.
- To acquire the ability to develop stories quickly.
- To exercise imaginative skills and discover hidden sources to tap into.
- To develop strong verbal as well as written storytelling skills.
- To create a personal connection between you and your work.
- To build a strong and varied portfolio of material for future use.

**CLASS SCHEDULE:** The class will be given weekly assignments that involve creating and breaking stories from a variety of starting points. These assignments will be accompanied by lecture and class discussion, then completed in differing ways: individually, in teams, in class and at home.

**WEEKLY ASSIGNMENTS:**

Part One: Personal Stories

Week 1: 1/11 – *Where do we find stories?*

- Discuss class expectations, deadlines and syllabus
- How do you find your stories? Experience, learning, imagination....and craft
- IN-CLASS: anecdotes about going to or from school as a child
- Natural storytelling...set up circumstances, collision/events, impact, aftermath

- What can we push, expand, heighten, strengthen....make more dramatic
- FOR NEXT CLASS: Bring in a story from your “family lore” ....you or someone in the family, a story often told or told in confidence, one that resonates for you. Write in three paragraphs (about a page)...prepare to present verbally.
  - What is special about it? Why do you tell it?
  - Who is the main character and why we care about them?
  - Beginning, middle and end of the story.
- Homework: Screen and Read: *Lady Bird*

#### Week 2: 1/18 – *Memory Stories*

- Discuss your “family lore” story. How do we create compelling stories from life? Is there a feature film here? Or is there a television series? A podcast? A short?
- FOR NEXT CLASS: write (for verbal presentation) about your greatest fear (now or in childhood) or greatest fantasy (now or then)...make it visceral
- Homework: Screen *Parasite*

#### Week 3: 1/25 – *Greatest fear or fantasy stories*

- Discuss greatest fear/fantasy (what scares you the most/what power would you die to have?) Who is your main character? Can you describe their moment (the exact scene) of greatest fear or fantasy? How to build to that moment?
- IN-CLASS: break into pairs and create a pitch for both partners’ favorite fear or fantasy story...
- FOR NEXT CLASS: bring in something that makes you angry (can be personal or political or social) try to find the scene where that anger explodes
- Homework: screen *Dark Waters* or *Erin Brockovich* or *Michael Clayton*

#### Week 4: 2/1 – *Writing from emotion to character*

- Discuss the thing that makes you angry. Is there a story there? A character?
- FOR NEXT CLASS: create three groups of three to meet outside class. Bring in three pitches for story episodes of a family sitcom: *Blackish*, *Modern Family*, *The Simpsons*, *Broad City*, *Fleabag*, etc. (We will vote on the shows and assign them in class.)
- **TO HAND IN:** Rewrite a two-page pitch of one of your previous stories: your fear/fantasy assignment, your anger assignment, or your memory story

#### Week 5: 2/8 – *Writing Family Sitcom pitches*

- **HAND IN:** your two page pitch of one of your stories
- Pitch and discuss sitcoms. Vote on the episode that gets picked up.
- Discuss that sitcoms are always family (of some kind, even workplace)
- FOR NEXT CLASS: world building – photo essays (power point) of a world you would like to use for a story. Discuss *True Detective*, *Ladybird*, *Parasite*, *Friday Night Lights* and how these shows/films rely on a sense of place.
- Homework: screen *Ford v Ferrari* or *The Crown*

Part Two: Using Genre to challenge your character and shape your story

Week 6: 2/15 – *Writing from place*

- Present your world to class via powerpoint/keynote with music if you like. Discuss ways to find a story for it. Is there a character who is an outgrowth of your particular place or a guide through it? Where is the conflict?!
- Discuss genre and how it helps shape a story and challenge your character.
- FOR NEXT CLASS: write a supernatural or horror-story pitch. (Can be a *Black Mirror Episode* or other short or series idea or a feature pitch.) Concentrate on character and WHY the story happens to them.

Week 7: 2/22 – *The Supernatural/Horror Story*

- Pitch and discuss your supernatural or horror stories. Who is the main character and why do we care? How are we made to believe in the story?
- IN-CLASS: Pair up and develop/combine/expand horror stories together
- FOR NEXT CLASS: Create a Trip With Destination (Road Trip) pitch.
- Homework: screen *1917*

Week 8: 3/1 – *Road Trip*

- Discuss Road Trip pitches.
- **TO HAND IN:** Midterm Project. Chose one of your pitches and develop it into a 5 page synopsis: a short pitch/teaser, description of the main character and then tell us the story, beginning-middle-resolution (acts 1-2-3.)

Week 9: 3/8 – *Writing for an Actor*

- **HAND IN:** Midterm project
- IN-CLASS: put actors' names in a hat. Put locations/worlds in a hat. Put genre in a hat. Teams pick and use the class to create a feature story for the actor/place.
- FOR NEXT CLASS: Create a character (biography) who is unable to love.
- Homework: screen *Knives Out* or *War of the Roses* or *As Good as it Gets*

Week: 3/15 – MIDSEMESTER BREAK

Week 10: 3/22 *Rom-Com (Love story)*

- Present character who is unable to love. What is their NEED?
- IN-CLASS: in groups find a perfect foil for that character. (A character MOST able to love or most able to crack the other's inability....a catalyst character)
- How to make comedy out of this material? Is the love with the catalyst?
- **TO HAND IN:** write a rom-com pitch (2 pages) How do they meet? What is the conflict? How does location help inform the story? How does it end? Is the character compelling enough? Is his/her need fulfilled?
- FOR NEXT CLASS: In teams pitch 2 episodes of a detective series, procedural, hospital drama, HBO series or historical drama (examples to be decided in class).

Week 11: 3/29 – *One-hour episodic: Detective, Hospital, Procedural Pitches*

- HAND IN: 2 page rom-com pitch.
- IN-CLASS: Teams pitch episodes for one-hour series. Vote on winning episode that gets picked up.
- FOR NEXT CLASS: find a myth or character from classical literature that is interesting to you and could inspire a story.

Part Three: Finding stories in myth, legend or existing material

Week 12: 4/5 - *Writing from Existing Material 1 (Myth and Legend and Superheroes)*

- Discuss and workshop mythical character/story and story possibilities.
- FOR NEXT CLASS: find a classical story/fairytale, (talk about how movies have used Shakespeare and Jane Austen) and create a **high school story** (comedy/romance/drama) using your chosen classical story as a guideline.
- OR... Create a hero or superhero and a potential story – series. Who is your Luke, your Harry, your Spiderman. What is their introduction (or creation story?) Who is their guide? Who is their antagonist?

Week 13: 4/12 – *Writing from Existing Material 2 (Myth and Legend and Superheroes)*

- Discuss your classical story/fairytale/legend story. Is your main character strong enough? How did the myth help inspire/inform your story?
- Or discuss your hero/superhero stories. Talk about Star Wars/Harry Potter/Comic Book Stories.
- FOR NEXT CLASS: Bring in a biography story. (\*This assignment will be given earlier in the semester to give you time to do some research.)
- Homework: screen *Theory of Everything* or *Hidden Figures*

Week 14: 4/19 – *Writing from Existing Material 3: The Biopic*

- Discuss your biography pitches. Is the character compelling enough to carry a feature and interest an actor? Are there enough obstacles? How does the world of the character help? Genre?
- FOR NEXT CLASS: Choose your favorite project of the semester (solo or with a partner) and take it to the next level. Incorporate not only the feedback you received when presenting it but any further ideas you have had to take the story to a great starting point for use in the future...a gift to your future self.

Week 15: 4/26 – *Next step finessing*

- Discuss variety of “next level” stories from any previous class
- FINAL PROJECT: organize your portfolio of all stories created. Include pertinent and helpful feedback and “what if” ideas for future use. Due May 3rd noon.

**MAY 3rd, NOON – FINAL PORTFOLIO (IN PDF) IS DUE:**

**EVALUATION CRITERIA:**

CNTV 250 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. The ability to generate compelling characters and ideas for cinema and television.
3. Demonstrated understanding how to workshop and develop ideas into stories.
4. The ability to develop a feature/pilot synopsis.
5. The ability to work collaboratively with other writers/creators.

**GRADING WEIGHTS:**

CNTV 250 grades are based on:

- Weekly Writing Assignments (final portfolio of ideas) .....40%
- Midsemester Synopsis.....10%
- Two rewritten pitches.....10%
- Reading and responding to classmates work (writer's room).....20%
- Final, overall portfolio of collected work.....20%

**EXPECTATION OF PROFESSIONALISM:**

Filmmakers collaborate. Professional filmmakers collaborate professionally, which in our class means participating respectfully and delivering work punctually. 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-read your assignment prior to submission.

**LAPTOP AND CELL PHONE POLICY:**

Cell-phones are prohibited in class; laptops may be used for note taking, or reading assignments, with permission by the professor.

**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 third 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 ongoing 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.

Note: Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and 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. The telephone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

## 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](http://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](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

### Support Systems:

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

[engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://equity.usc.edu), [titleix.usc.edu](http://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](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](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*

[studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssu](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssu)

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](http://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](http://dps.usc.edu), [emergency.usc.edu](http://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](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](mailto: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**