

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
Screenwriting CTWR 250 – Breaking the Story
Spring 2023
(Two Units, Required, Section: 19360D)

Instructor: Don Bohlinger
Class Schedule: Monday 10-12:50
Class Location: SCA 258
Office Hours: Monday 1-4, or by appointment (or on Zoom)
Contact Information: dfb@usc.edu, 323 804-0110

COURSE GOALS:

- Ideation: learn where and how to find film and television stories
- Voice: investigate and expand your *unique* storytelling instincts, interests, and nature
- Character: learn how to develop compelling characters who will drive your stories
- Theme: learn how to discover and grow your theme, an expression of your vision
- Development: learn how to “break” these stories, structurally, into a saleable pitch
- Synopsis: learn how to write two polished 5-10 page synopses.
- Portfolio: write 8 screen and television pitches, 2 two page rewritten pitches and two 5-10 page story synopses.

COURSE OBJECTIVE:

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

Where do you find your ideas? When do you have an idea how to develop that idea into a relatable story? And once you have this story how do you write it as a pitch you can sell?

Every screenwriter has had this happen to him or her. You are at a party and an uncle or an aunt or friend pulls you into a corner and says, “I’ve got a movie for you.” Then they tell you a story and say, “It’s yours, write it!” And that is the difference between a professional writer and a dilettante. The professional writer must find a way to write it. A professional writer must break the whole story, beginning to end, and most importantly, break that story through the compelling characters they have created.

It begins and ends with character: their hopes, their dreams, their wants.

This is an introductory course in writing for the screen and television in which you develop your resources as a storyteller. We will explore how and where you find your

stories. We will mine your faculties of memory, experience, and observation; sharpen your storytelling toolbox by experimenting with genre conventions, group storytelling exercises and an engaged writer's table.

The goal is for you to discover weekly feature (or television series) stories from different sources, then pitch, and workshop them in class. You will then pick two and write them as 5–10-page synopses.

The emphasis is on the discovery and development of cinematic and television stories, and the way of telling them should be yours alone. Imagination, as Samson Raphaelson said, **“is not the capacity to invent but the ability to see and develop what is there.”** In exercising your imagination this course provides you with a foundation for a career as a professional screen and television writer.

CLASS SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNMENTS:

Part One: Personal Stories

Week 1: 1/9 – *Where do we find stories?*

- Discuss class expectations, deadlines and syllabus.
- How do you find your stories? How do professionals find their stories?
- Discuss *In Bruges/ Lars and the Real Girl/Lady Bird*. Discussion of the breaking of these stories.
- In class: News stories – we will distribute several news stories – in teams we will develop them into story pitches.
- Introduction to pitching and the writing of the three-page synopsis.
- Homework: Bring your favorite child/teenage or family story (one that happened to you or someone in your family) to class. Write it as a three-page synopsis.
 - What is special about it? Why do you tell it?
 - Who is the main character and why we care about him/her?
 - Beginning, middle and end of the story.
- Homework: Screen and Read: *Lady Bird*

Week 2: 1/16 – University Holiday, Martin Luther King Day

Week 3: 1/23 – *Memory Stories*

- Discuss your Memory Story. How do we create compelling stories from life? Is there a feature film here? Or is there a television series? A podcast?
- Homework: bring in your greatest fear or greatest fantasy...

Week 4: 1/30 – *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 groups of two and create a pitch for both partners' favorite fear or fantasy story...
- Homework – bring in something that makes you angry (can be personal or political) try to find the scene where that anger explodes.

Week 5: 2/6 – *Writing from emotion to character*

- Discuss the thing that makes you angry. Is there a story there? A character? Workshop the story in class.
- Homework #1: Rewrite and submit via email a two-page pitch of either: your fear/fantasy assignment, your anger assignment, or your memory story. **SHORT REWRITE ONE.**
- Homework #2: three groups of three. Bring in three pitches for story episodes of a family sitcom: *shows to be determined in class*, etc. (We will vote on the shows and assign them in class.)

Week 6: 2/13 – *Writing Family Sitcom pitches*

- Submit via email to instructor **SHORT REWRITE #1**
- Pitch and discuss sitcoms. Vote on the episode that gets picked up.
- Discuss *Lady Bird* – how sense of place helped her inspire the story.
- Homework: world building – photo essays (power point) of a world you would like to use for a story. Discuss *Atlanta*, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, *Better Call Saul*, *Friday Night Lights* and how these shows rely on a sense of place.

Week 7: 2/20 Presidents' Day, University Holiday

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

Week 8: 2/27 – *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 place. Where is the conflict?!
- Discuss genre and how genre can help shape a story and challenge your character.
- Homework: write a supernatural or horror-story pitch from a scenario. (Can be a *Black Mirror Episode* or a feature pitch.) Concentrate on character and WHY the story happens to him/her.

Week 9: 3/6 – *The Supernatural/Horror Story*

- Pitch and discuss your supernatural or horror story pitches. Who is the main character and why do we care?
- Homework: Create a Trip with Destination (Road Trip) pitch.

Week 10: 3/13 Spring Recess

Week 11: 3/20 – *Road Trip*

- Discuss Road Trip pitches.
- Homework: Midterm Project. Chose one of your pitches and develop it into a 5–7-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 12: 3/27 - *Writing for an Actor*

- MIDTERM PROJECTS due.
- In Class – put actors' names in a hat. Put locations in a hat. Put genre in a hat. Teams pick and use the class to create a feature story for the actor/place.
- Homework: Create a character (biography) who is unable to love.

Week 13: 4/3 *Rom-Com (Love story)*

- Discuss 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.)
- Homework: write a rom-com pitch (2 pages) SHORT REWRITE #2. 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?
- Homework #2: In teams pitch 2 episodes of a detective series, procedural, hospital drama, HBO series or historical drama (examples to be decided in class).

Week 14: 4/10 – *One-hour episodic: Detective, Hospital, Procedural Pitches*

- Email your rom-com story (SHORT REWRITE #2) to the instructor.
- In class: Teams pitch episodes for one-hour series. Vote on winning episode that gets picked up.
- Homework: find a myth or character from classical literature that is interesting to you and could inspire a story. Use this to create a hero or superhero and a potential story – series. Who is your Enola Holmes, your Luke Skywalker, your Harry Potter, your Spiderman, your Emily Dickinson? What is their introduction (or creation story?) Who is their guide? Who is their antagonist?
- Or.... find a classical story/fairytale, (we'll talk about how movies have used Shakespeare and Jane Austen) and create a high school (comedy/romance/drama) using your chosen classical story as a guideline.

Part Three: Finding stories in myth, legend or existing materialWeek 15: 4/17 - *Writing from Existing Material (Myth and Legend and Superheroes)*

- Discuss and workshop mythical character/story and story possibilities.
- Homework next week. Final Project Assignment: rewrite your pitch for your final project to be presented on the final class.

Week 18: 4/24 – *Workshop Final Projects*

- Discuss your final projects (synopsis 7-10 pages)
- Due on May 8th

May 8th, 8 AM- 10 AM – Final Portfolio is due:

1. Two Rewritten Pitches (from class) 2 pages each
2. Midterm synopsis – 5-7 pages
3. Final synopsis (chosen from the second half of class pitches) 7-10 pages

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 that idea into a story.
4. The ability to develop a feature/pilot synopsis.

GRADING WEIGHTS:

CNTV 250 grades are based on:

- Weekly Writing Assignments (final portforlio of ideas)50%
- Midsemester Synopsis.....10%
- Final Synopsis.....20%
- Reading and responding to classmates work (writer's room).....20%

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