

**USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS**  
**The John Wells Division of Writing for Screen & Television**

**CTWR 206a: Writing the Screenplay**  
**Section 19156**  
**(2 Units)**  
**Fall 2023**

Instructor: Jeremy Novick  
Class Schedule: Fridays, 1-3:50 pm  
Class Location: SCA 363  
Office Hours: By Appointment  
Contact Information: [jnovick@usc.edu](mailto:jnovick@usc.edu)

**Course Objective:**

Our goal is to learn the skills and techniques utilized by professional screenwriters to ideate, outline, and draft feature-length screenplays in a workshop setting. The first semester of this two-semester course will culminate in students writing and presenting a full outline and the first act of their feature screenplays.

**Course Description:**

This course is partly instructional – with lectures and materials aimed at teaching the basics of character development, structure, and scene work – but it is mostly practical application. We will learn how to write a screenplay the best way there is to learn: by writing one. In trying, at times failing, and ultimately succeeding, we will all cultivate a better personal understanding of our own personal voices and styles, our diverse and complimentary points of view on the world, and of what makes “a good story well told.”

**Suggested Course Reading:**

The following titles are suggested reading by the instructor. While these books are not required for the course, they are invaluable tools that students will be able to refer to throughout the course and long into their careers:

***The Tools of Screenwriting***, by David Howard and Edward Mabley

***Screenwriting is Rewriting*** by Jack Epps, Jr.

***Aristotle’s Poetics for Screenwriters*** by Michael Tierno

Screenplays to be assigned by the instructor on a case-by-case basis.

**Script Format:**

All scenes will be written in standard script format using professional screenwriting software such as "Final Draft." **If you don’t have access to screenwriting software, please see me immediately, and we will work on an alternative solution together.**

**Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:**

Laptops are to be used solely for scene work being discussed in class, and only with the permission of the instructor. Cell phones will be turned off. **Please note: You should always have a notebook/pen available.**

### **Grading Criteria:**

Students will turn in their work by 1pm on the Sunday before class, by a method to be determined by the instructor. All work will be sent to the instructor, as well as all classmates, so that feedback can be given. This deadline is extremely important. As a workshop-style course, it is vital that we read each other's material and come prepared for class, and we must be respectful of each other's time in doing that work. If you repeatedly fail to meet weekly deadlines without communication, it will affect grading.

### **Grading Breakdown**

- 10% = Participation
- 10% = Pitching Loglines
- 10% = Protagonist/Antagonist Biographies
- 10% = "BME" Treatment
- 10% = Beat Sheet
- 10% = First Draft Outline
- 10% = Revised Outline
- 10% = First Sequence
- 10% = Second Sequence
- 10% = Final Revised Act One

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%	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. **Spellcheck and proofread** your assignment prior to submission. We are all taking the time to read your work; you should, too.

On the subject of reading work, this is a workshop class at its heart. As such, it is imperative that we all read everyone's work prior to class time and are prepared with thoughtful, constructive, and respectful notes. Failure to come prepared to class will be reflected in grading. The workload here is significant, but it is worth it. You will get out of this class what you put into it.

### **Internet Policy:**

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere 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 only. Cell phones should be turned off. Students using phones will be asked to leave class.

**Please note: You should always have a notebook/pen available.**

### **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, etc.

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 the 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.

### **A.I. Policy**

The uses of generative Artificial Intelligence to create narrative continue to evolve throughout the media workplace. However, it is vital that before relying on AI to assist in aspects of storytelling that we learn to source and execute our work via our own unique imagination.

Creating, analytical, and critical thinking skills are part of the learning outcomes of this course. All assignments should be prepared by the student working individually or in groups. Students may not have another person or entity complete any substantive portion of the assignment. Developing strong competencies in these areas will prepare you for a competitive workplace. Therefore, using AI-generated tools is prohibited in this course, will be identified as plagiarism, and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

## **CLASS SCHEDULE:**

All dates, assignments, and subjects may change at the discretion of the professor.

### **Week 1: A Good Story Well Told (Introductions, Screening, Discussion)**

- Introductions, syllabus, the “Constructive Contract,” and the principles of writing a screenplay. What makes “a good story well told?”
- Screening: Act One of “How to Train Your Dragon”
- **Assignment #1:** Finish watching HTTYD on your own. Write a 1–2-page analysis of the film, answer the following:
  - Who is the main character? Name a strength of theirs, a flaw of theirs, and a contradiction of theirs.
  - What does the main character want? Why do they want it? What happens if they don’t get it?
  - What stands in the way of the character getting what they want? What makes it hard for them?
  - Who is the main antagonist? Name a strength, flaw, and contradiction of theirs as well.
  - Try your best to write a 1-2 sentence logline for the movie.
- **Assignment #2:** Come up with five (5) loglines to pitch for your feature film. Don’t worry about the loglines being perfect; we’ll get better at that as we go. But be ready to pitch these ideas verbally in class next week (10%).

### **Week 2: It All Starts with Character**

- Discuss our movie analyses, and revisit our question: “What makes a good story well told?”
- Pitch loglines and discuss ideas for our feature films. Narrow your loglines down and choose one (1) that you will write this year.
- **Assignment #3:** Write a biography for both your protagonist and antagonist (1 page each), including what their arc is in the movie. Then, write 1-page letters from your protagonist to your antagonist, and vice versa (10%).

### **Week 3: Theme & Finding Your North Star**

- Review character biographies. Discuss the concept of a “North Star.”
- **Assignment #4:** Write a 1-page “North Star Statement,” highlighting what excites you about this story and why you feel compelled to tell it.

### **Week 4: The Treatment**

- Discuss North Stars, and how we can use them as guidance in breaking the story. Discussion on treatments and how to nail the important beats of a story.
- **Assignment #5:** Write “BME” (Beginning, Middle and End) Treatment for your film. Don’t worry about specific structure just yet; the goal with these is to illustrate how your character’s external journey pushes them along their internal journey and bolsters your theme and North Star (10%).

### **Week 5: The Big Film Structure Lecture**

- Discuss BME Treatments. Lecture on 3-act and 8-sequence feature structure, handout provided.
- Screening: Kurt Vonnegut, “Shapes of Stories”

- **Assignment #6:** Put together a “beat sheet” for your story (examples will be provided), with your act breaks and sequences labeled. Things to look for here: A strong opening. Inciting incident is big. By end of Act One, protagonist is actively driving the plot, pursuing a high-stakes goal. Obstacles and antagonists are formidable. Midpoint, external is escalating, internal- things start to crack. Act Two is the lowest point one can get. Externally and internally. Act Three they change and fight biggest battle yet and actively cause their own resolution. Strong closing (10%).

#### **Week 6: Therefore, And Then, & But / B-Stories & Subplots**

- Discuss and workshop Beat Sheets. Talk about the difference “therefore,” “and then,” and “but” as it pertains to your stories.
- Discuss the addition of subplots and how they can bolster your main tension.
- **Assignment #6:** Revise your beat sheets, adding your subplots for supporting characters and including “therefores” and “buts” between each scene.

#### **Week 7: The Outline**

- Discuss and workshop treatments, and discuss the move onto outline, with examples and Q&A about what an outline really is.
- **Assignment #7:** Prepare a first draft of your full feature outline (examples will be provided), elaborating on the moments in your beat sheet and connecting the dots between them, and introducing any subplots with supporting characters (10%).

#### **Week 8: Fall Recess**

- No class this week. Fall recess. Continue to work on outlines. Instructor will assign scripts and other documents to read that are germane to your story.

#### **Week 9: The Outline II: Electric Boogaloo / How to Give Notes**

- Discuss and workshop outlines. We are looking to identify and fix as many story and character issues at this stage as we possibly can, so they don’t pop up in the actual script. This means we are all going to get notes, HOWEVER, per our Constructive Contract, we are still going to remain helpful, supportive, and respectful. This means we will also have a brief lecture (or refresher course) on how to give – and take – good, solid creative notes.
- **Assignment #8:** Revise outlines based on notes from the class (10%).

#### **Week 10: Leave It All on the Page**

- Discuss and workshop outlines. At this point, we will hopefully all be moving onto pages, but in all likelihood, we may need another week with outline. This is okay!
- **Assignment #8:** Begin writing your first sequence (10%).

#### **Week 11: How to Grab the Reader**

- Workshop first sequences. Brief discussion on the importance of the first 10 pages.
- **Assignment #9:** Revise your first sequences.

#### **Week 12: Veteran’s Day**

- No class this week. Veteran’s Day Observed. Continue revising your first sequences.

**Week 13: How to Keep the Reader Interested**

- Workshop first sequences
- **Assignment #10:** Begin writing your second sequence (10%).

**Week 14: Thanksgiving**

- No class this week. Thanksgiving.

**Week 15: Found in the Desert (Or “How to Not Get Overwhelmed When Writing Act Two”)**

- Workshop second sequences. Discussion about Act Two.
- **Assignment #12:** Revise and combine your pages to complete your First Act.

**Finals Week:** Final pages for Act One due during Finals Week (10%)

**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” <https://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, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

**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>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>PLEASE NOTE:</b> <b>FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX</b></p>
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