

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

**CTWR 413: Writing the Short Screenplay (sec #19177)  
Fall 2023**

Instructor: Craig Sabin  
Class Schedule: Monday/10:00 AM-12:50 PM  
Class Location: SCA 342  
Office Hours: by appointment only  
Contact Information: rsabin@usc.edu

**Course Objective:**

CTWR 413 is an intensive writing class held in workshop format. We'll work on the fundamentals of screenwriting and screen storytelling, including format, world building, character introductions, the dramatic scene, and short script outlining and drafting, getting you all ready for CTPR 310. Class focus will include;

- Introduction to the craft of screenwriting.
- To learn and practice the elements of a "Good story well told."
- To strengthen & deepen your ability to conceive compelling ideas, characters and stories through experience and observation
- To learn to write from a visual and aural perspective.
- To learn narrative structure
- To learn the building blocks of the dramatic scene.
- To write (and rewrite) a short script screenplay

**Course Description:**

In CTWR 413, we will focus on refining your ideas so that it conveys your truth powerfully and visually, and we'll gain expertise with the tools for doing so, such as visual writing, compelling characters, and narrative structure for short-form films.

There will be two fronts to our approach. The primary focus will be on writing new material for this class. Students will be assigned writing exercises, both in class and for homework, designed to develop their screenwriting muscle. Students will also develop and write 2 short scripts, 5 pages in length max., for their upcoming CTPR 310 class.

The second front, no less important, will be in workshopping the material of the rest of the class. Each student will be expected to read and "note up" the work of fellow classmates, as well as be prepared to discuss the work in class. This will help you to more easily identify the effects of good craft and poor craft, and apply lessons learned

to your own work. We'll also read produced screenplays, to see what lessons can be learned.

In addition to writing, we'll be watching examples of the elements and tools discussed in already produced short films, some successful, some not. You'll see how filmmakers before you dealt with the issues you're dealing with and learn from them what to do, and what to avoid.

**Course Reading:**

You should read as many screenplays as possible to familiarize yourself with the styles and form of other professional writers. You will be assigned some scripts to read on your own time and be prepared to discuss them in class. Additionally, the following books are highly suggested:

"The New Elements of Standard Screenplay Format" by Jean Paul Ouellette

"The Tools of Screenwriting" by Howard & Mabley

"Creative Filmmaking From the Inside Out" by Dannenbaum, Hodge, Mayer

**Grading Criteria:**

All assignments are due by the Friday following class, no later than 5:00 pm. Students must turn in all assignments in PDF format, via Dropbox. Late assignments will be recorded as such, and will negatively impact their grades, each late day increasing the penalty.

All work must be properly formatted and punctuated, correctly spelled and grammatically correct. Assignments should be read and notes prepared by start of the following class.

Participation:	10%
Assignments:	50% (15 assignments at 2% each)
Script 1:	15%
Script 2:	15%
Final Essays	10%
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	100%

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%

**A** : Work of **excellent** quality. Outstanding application of the dramatic principles and fulfillment of course requirements and deadlines as specified in the syllabus.

**B** : Work of **good** quality. Above average fulfillments of course requirements and deadlines.

**C** : Work of **fair** quality. Minimum fulfillment of course requirements and deadlines for passing graduate credit.

**C-: FAIL to meet minimum grade for credit. NON PASSING GRADE.**

**Missed Assignments or Incompletes:**

The only acceptable excuses for missing an assignment or taking an incomplete in the course are personal illness or a family emergency. Students must inform the instructor before the assignment due date and present verifiable evidence in order for a make-up to be scheduled. Students who need to take incompletes must also present documentation of the problem to the instructor before the final assignment is due.

**All work must originate in this class** – no revisions of work started in other classes or adaptations of others' work will be accepted without the prior permission of the instructor.

**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.

**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 a work-in-progress. A working writer needs to develop *the art of collaboration* while working with their peers.

**Internet Policy:**

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the internet.

**Recording Devices:**

You may not record lectures or workshops without the consent of the instructor.

**Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:**

Respect is the rule. Please silence cell phones during class. Laptops are allowed for note-taking only. Please show the class and your fellow students the respect they deserve.

**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 of time.**

### **Class Schedule:**

Please note that all dates are subject to change at the discretion of the professor.

**Week 1 8/21:** Welcome back! Introductions, Review of the Syllabus. Favorite films? What is narrative? What is the difference between screenwriting and other forms of fiction? The importance of audience engagement, and how to create "tension". The importance of Goal.

In Class; Describe a trip to school.

Assignment; Roommates; Describe a significant space shared by two people, in harmony, in conflict, and then with only one person– **without showing the actual people.** (1.5 pg.) Due 8/25

Assignment; Read "Juno" by Diablo Cody. Be prepared to discuss in class.

**Week 2 8/28:** Workshop Roommate Exercise. (Group A) The importance of the personal, mixed with wonder. What's a Hero anyway? The essential elements of a Main Character. Formatting and writing visually and efficiently

Assignment; Preparation for a Significant Event. (2 pg.) Due 9/01

Assignment; Read "Get Out" by Jordan Peele. Be prepared to discuss in class.

**Week 3 9/04:** Labor Day-- go home!

**Week 4 9/11:** Workshop Preparation Exercise, (Group B). The importance of motivated Conflict. Antagonist (Shadow Protagonist). The function of Transformation. Transformation in props, behaviors, locations– plant/payoff and repetition with variation. Discussion: Twist, Stretch, Expectations and Surprise. We'll watch scenes from "Animal Crackers" and "The Apartment".

Assignment; The "Wrongest" Person; Write a dialogue scene where a person must get rid of a second character, who won't leave. Include cross-cutting. (3-5 pgs.) Due 9/15

**Week 5 9/18:** Workshop "Wrongest Person" Exercise. (Group C) Goal and Plans to Accomplish the Goal. Tactics as Character. Audience Engagement, Rooting Interest, Dramatic Irony and Verbal Irony. Dialogue. Suspense. We'll watch scenes from "DieHard" and "LA Confidential".

Assignment; Seduction/Persuasion: Write a dialogue scene where a person tries to persuade another person to do something. 3-5 pages. Due 9/22

**Week 6 9/25:** Workshop Seduction/Persuasion exercise. (Group A) How do we convey information/relationships in film? Dialogue vs. Visual exposition. The power and limits of "Don't Tell, Show!" How do we convey backgrounds? We'll do a deep dive into exposition, and watch clips from "Ghost Protocol" "Get Out" and "The Closer".

Assignment; Significant Object: A person prepares for a significant encounter using a significant prop. Things go in an unexpected direction. 3-5 pages. Due 9/29

**Week 7 10/02:** Workshop Significant Object Exercise. (Group B) The power of Subtext; When communication is conflict. Complex characters and opposing motivations. We'll watch clips from "It's A Wonderful Life" and "The Social Network." **CTPR 310 instructors visit to discuss the class.**

Assignment; Prepare 3 short script ideas to present to the class. Due 10/09

**Week 8 10/09:** Workshop and greenlight short script ideas. Putting it all together-- motivated goal, props, tensions, suspense, plant/payoffs, reversals, differentiation. Mining for your theme. Short Film structure.

Assignment; Write a brief outline for Pitches #1 and #2 (2 pgs. max.) Due 10/13

**Week 9 10/16:** Workshop Outlines. (Group C) Hero? Goal? Motivation? Conflict? Mood? Setting? Twist? Stretch?

Assignment: Write first draft of Script #1. 5-7 pgs. Due 10/20

**Week 10 10/23:** Workshop First Drafts. (Group A) Creating a rewrite plan. Addressing the note behind the note. Review Tools and Twists.

Assignment; Rewrite Script #1 5 pages. Due 10/27

**Week 11 10/30:** Workshop Rewrite. (Group B) Review Transformation and Short Film Structure

Assignment; Write First Draft of Script #2. 5-7 pgs. Due 11/03

**Week 12 11/06:** Workshop First Draft #2. (Group C)

Assignment; Rewrite Script #2. (5 pages) Due 11/10

**Week 13 11/13:** Workshop First Draft #2. (Group A) Breaking ground on your script. Format red flags. Choose preferred 310 script  
Assignment; Revise Chosen 310 script. (5 pages max.) Due 11/17

**Week 14 11/20:** Workshop Rewrite. (Group B)  
Assignment; Polish Chosen 310 script. Due 11/24 (Heads up! Thanksgiving Weekend!)

**Week 15 11/27:** Workshop Polish. (Group C) Final Questions? Writers to watch and read.

Finals Week: Summary Project. As your **summary** project/exam, write up your notes about the strengths and weaknesses of everyone's final project, including your own. **Deliver these notes to your colleagues and instructor via Dropbox shared folder. Due Friday, Dec. 8th.**

### **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 Student Accessibility Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776*

[osas.usc.edu](http://osas.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/ssa](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa)

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.

<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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