

CTWR 413 Faculty syllabus – Fall 2023

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
John Wells Division of Writing
CTWR 413: Writing the Short Film 1
SPRING 2023
(2 Units, Required, Section #19180)

Instructor: Erick Castrillon
Email: ecastril@usc.edu
Section: 19180

Class time: Wed 10:00 AM - 12:50 PM
Location: SCA 259
Office hours: By appointment

"The writing became so fluid that I sometimes felt as if I were writing for the sheer pleasure of telling a story, which may be the human condition that most resembles levitation."
– Gabriel García Márquez

"Every painter paints the cosmogony of himself."
– Salvador Dalí

"Is my responsibility first and foremost to the film, which is to tell the truth? Or is it to my family, which is to protect them? Sometimes I couldn't do both."
– Lulu Wang

GOALS OF THIS COURSE:

- Introduction to the craft of screenwriting.
- Story: To understand what makes good stories and how to craft them for short films.
- To strengthen & deepen your ability to conceive honest and 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.
- Short Scripts: To learn to write effective and moving short scripts.
- Rewriting: To understand the importance of rewriting.

This is an introductory course in writing for the screen in which you will learn and develop your craft as a storyteller. You will learn to draw on your memories,

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experiences, observation and imagination to create honest and compelling characters and stories for the screen.

This is a workshop class. Together we will read and critique a series of weekly assignments, both in and outside the class, designed to help you understand the fundamentals of screenwriting. You will learn to bring your visual and aural senses to your writing, to see and hear your film as you write it, developing and exploring your characters through situations of conflict.

As the major assignment of the class you will apply your skills to writing a short **5 page max CTPR 310 script**.

Screenplay format is not an exact science. Within accepted parameters you should develop a format style that you find both comfortable and expressive. To help you learn format and an expressive, cinematic writing style, **you are urged to read as many professional screenplays as possible**. You will also be required to read and analyze screenplays provided by the instructor. By the third week your assignments will be written in professional screenplay format. We recommend using **Final Draft**. If you don't own the software, you can download a free demo version—with watermark—from the Final Draft website (<http://www.finaldraft.com/downloads/demo-final-draft.php>). You may use this demo version to do all your assignments. Other software programs are also available for free online.

READING:

The following book is highly suggested:

"The Tools of Screenwriting" by Howard & Mabley

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

GRADING:

In-class exercises 30%

Assignments 60%

Participation 10%

Class participation includes full involvement in and contribution to all class discussions, as well as reading (in advance at times; see schedule above) the assignments of the other students and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.

All work must be delivered in proper format and delivered to the instructor and all classmates by 10AM on the day before class.

Late assignments will result in a lower grade.

ALL PROJECTS MUST BE ORIGINAL IDEAS CREATED BY YOU AND YOU ALONE. ADAPTATIONS OF ANY KIND, (I.E. BOOKS, FEATURES, TV SERIES) OR CO-WRITING WORK WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.

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.

Per the 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.**

Writing Division Attendance Policy

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This class is a workshop and your participation in the discussion is mandatory. 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.

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. **Although we will be exploring each student's inner world, have in mind this class is not psychotherapy, and the instructor is not a qualified therapist. If there is something you're not ready to share, protect yourself first and foremost.**

Surfing and Texting Policy

This is not allowed during class time, unless required by the instructor. Please save your texting and surfing until class break.

Internet Policy

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the internet. Violations are subject to university disciplinary policy.

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COMPUTER USE:

Laptops and tablets may be used in class for class related matters. Their use beyond class related matters can result in loss of the privilege to use them.

Cell phone use is not permitted during class time, barring a life or death emergency.

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

CLASS SCHEDULE

NOTE: SYLLABUS MAY SHIFT ACCORDING TO CLASS NEEDS.

WEEK ONE - MEMORY AND HONESTY

In Class Discussion: what is a story

1. Honest writing
2. Character wants and needs
3. Character Arch (change)
4. Go over screenwriting glossary—key terms that will become your cinematic toolbox.

In class assignment – Core Memory Confession

- Recall several important moments in your life. Was this moment traumatic? Embarrassing? Silly? Happy? Exciting? Straight up messed-up? Choose one of the events above and recall what led up to this moment. Recall things, places, activities, people, clothes connected with that core moment that changed you. Now briefly share this event in detail with the whole class, allowing yourself to become vulnerable by inhabiting your core memory. (More “telling”, less “reading”).

Assignment for next week:

1. Read first assigned short script– who is the main character, what does he/she/they actively want in the story? Who is the main opposition? Answer these questions in one written paragraph.
2. Start a daily dream journal.
3. 2nd “Memory” Prompt Describe the following memories:
 - That secret you knew about your parents/sibling/friend/teacher... etc.
 - That one day you or someone you knew messed up big, big time.

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1 page each. **Be ready to share your favorite in class.** Choose one of the above prompts and describe in vivid detail: who were the people involved? Where did it happen? What feelings, textures, and moods do you recall? What is the conflict between the people in your story?

WEEK TWO – ROOMMATES

In Class:

1. Discuss student's Memory prompts.
2. Discuss assigned script while at the same time going over script format.
3. Screen the short film of the assigned script (Vámonos).

Assignments:

1. *Keep up with the daily dream journal.*
2. *This exercise introduces the use of props, costume, and character revealing activity and action. Helps the writer practice time ellipsis, the technique of planting and payoff, and/or repetition with a variation. And of course preparation and aftermath. In two parts. Length: Screenplay format. No more than a page total. (Scene 1 = ¾ page, Scene 2 = ¼ page)*

*Pick an interesting character and place him or her **alone** in a location **significant** to that character. (A home, an office, a combat bunker.) Show the character preparing for some character-revealing event, such as a crucial job interview, a murder, a confession, an encounter with aliens. Whatever. The point is to show through props and movement not only what the event is, but how the character feels about what's about to happen. This should not be a guessing game. We are not given clues, but glimpses into the character's hopes and fears. It should be crystal clear what the event is when the character leaves the location. Then, ellipse time and show the character's return. (We do not see the primary / middle scene of the event.) But when the character returns to his home, or aircraft hanger, or office... **we should know exactly what happened** and how the character feels about it by changes in their demeanor, costume, props, etc.*

WEEK THREE – PREPARATION FOR A DATE / SIGNIFICANT EVENT

In class:

1. Go over "Roommates" exercises.
2. Screen short film and break it down in discussion.

*Pick an interesting character and place him or her **alone** in a location **significant** to that character. (A home, an office, a combat bunker.) Show the character preparing for some character-revealing event, such as a crucial job interview, a murder, a confession, an encounter with aliens. Whatever. The point is to show through props and movement not only what the event is, but how the character feels about what's about to happen. This should not be a guessing game. We are not*

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WEEK FOUR - TRUE OR FALSE

In Class:

1. Read and discuss Preparation For A Date assignments.
2. Watch and discuss Short Film (*The Bathtub*)

Assignments for next week:

3. “True/False” assignment. (Write two small, two-paragraph, stories. One is absolutely true. One is absolutely false. The class will try to determine which one is which and why.
4. Keep up with dream journal.

WEEK FIVE - DIALOGUE SCENE: “WRONGEST” / UNEXPECTED PERSON

In Class:

1. Read “TRUE/FALSE” stories.
2. Screen and discuss short film (TBD)

Assignment for next week:

1. Keep up with daily dream journal.
2. Building on the personal experiences and memories from previous assignments, write the following exercise: “WRONGEST PERSON/INTRUDER” *A dialogue scene between two characters. Should build and employ many of elements already introduced (especially “Preparation for a Date”). Preparation, planting and pay-off, etc. (For some reason, writers tend to forget the simplest elements, like sound and light to help the audience expect a romantic or violent scene...) Designed to reveal character through conflict, to build suspense through cross-cutting and a ticking clock, and to practice dialogue -- including attitude, vernacular/voice, scene/plot advertising, exposition. Length: 3 - 5 pages.*

Character A prepares some location for character B's arrival, but character C shows up instead! This should be, for what we know of character A and his/her plans, the absolute worst person to appear. Character A must get rid of character C before he/she crosses paths with character B! But, character A cannot come out and say exactly why character C must leave. (“Listen mom, you gotta leave because I was about to smoke crack with my favorite girl...” that cannot happen.) For this to work, the audience must know what is being planned and the stakes involved. Also, character C must be entirely motivated to stay. (Mom is sick and took the day off!, for example.)

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The scene ends immediately when Character B arrives, whether Character A is successful in getting rid of character C, or not.

WEEK SIX: DIALOGUE SCENE — SEDUCTION / PERSUASION

In Class:

1. Read “Wrongest Person” assignment.
2. Screen and discuss short film (TBD)

Assignment for next week:

1. *Final dream journal entree.*
2. The goal of this scene is to explore characters – their past and present relationships. This is a good scene to introduce the concept of exposition through conflict.

Length: 3 - 5 pages.

One character wants another character to do something. The seducer should know which "buttons" to push. The goal should be appealing to the person being seduced, but that person should have legitimate, character revealing opposition. This need not be sexual or romantic. The seduction/persuasion should escalate. The scene ends when the seducee agrees or doesn't.

[CTPR 310 TEACHERS WILL VISIT FOR 20 MINUTES DURING WEEK 6 TO DESCRIBE PARAMETERS OF THE CLASS.]

WEEK SEVEN: SIGNIFICANT OBJECT

In Class:

1. Read “Seduction/Persuasion” assignment.
2. Screen and discuss short film (TBD)

Assignment for next week:

The goal of this scene is to build audience's expectations by using a significant prop. This scene should employ many of the elements practiced so far, including preparation, use of light and sound, manipulating time, motivated opposing characters, suspense and surprise, reversal and character change.

Length: 3 – 5 pages.

A character prepares for a significant encounter and plans to use a certain object to get what they want. Because of the conflict with a second (or more) character(s) the prop ends up being used in an entirely different way. (Cheap gift of perfume; a failed

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apology; the perfume is used as poison, etc; Hitchcock: A leg of lamb for dinner is used as murder weapon.)

WEEK 8 FALL RECESS FALLS ON THURS & FRIDAY, OCTOBER 12 & 13.

WEEK EIGHT: SHORT FILM IDEAS

In Class:

1. Read “Significant Object” assignment.
2. Screen and discuss short film (TBD)

SHORT FILM IDEAS: *Create 3(three) possible ideas for your CTPR 310 film. Two to three sentence written pitch for each but be prepared to expound verbally. (Ideas can be any genre, as well as documentary or experimental. The two parameters are that the ideas must be inspired by your exercises or dream journals, and that the protagonists MUST CHANGE.*

Students should consider the production limitations of the 310 project; limiting the number of locations, physical complexity of action, use of minors, etc.

WEEK NINE: PITCHING 310 IDEAS

In Class:

1. Pitch CTPR 310 ideas and get a feel for the ones that are working the most for the class. Ultimately it’s up to each student which two (2) stories they choose to develop regardless of class or instructor’s suggestions.

Assignments for next week:

Write up your first 310 idea as a 5 page screenplay. (310 narratives should have a maximum of 3 pages dialogue total.) 508 script length is 5 pages and is primarily visual, with limited-dialogue. DELIVER SCRIPT BY 10AM THE DAY BEFORE CLASS.

WEEK TEN: REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFTS 310 SCRIPT #1

Discuss Script #1.

Assignment: *Revise 310 script #1.*

WEEK ELEVEN: REVIEW & WORKSHOP FIRST DRAFT 310 SCRIPT #2

Discuss Script #2.

Assignment: *Revise 310 script #2.*

WEEK TWELVE: VETERANS DAY FRIDAY, NOVEMBER

WEEK TWELVE: REVIEW & WORKSHOP REVISED DRAFT 310 SCRIPT #2

Discuss Script 2 revision.

Students select one of the two revised scripts to pursue further.

Assignment: Rewrite selected 310 script.

WEEK THIRTEEN: REVIEW & WORKSHOP REWRITTEN 310 SCRIPT.

Discuss revised chosen script.

Assignment: Second rewrite of selected 310 script.

WEEK FOURTEEN: <u>THANKSGIVING</u>, WED-FRI, NOV 22 – 24TH.

Assignment: Final (third) rewrite of the selected 310 script.

WEEK FIFTEEN: REVIEW SCRIPT REVISIONS. CLASSES END.

Discuss final rewrite of chosen script.

Final Assignment: 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 email in Week 17.**

Length: One paragraph per project. 2 – 3 pages.

WEEK SIXTEEN: STUDY DAYS.**WEEK SEVENTEEN: SUMMARY PROJECT. VIA EMAIL**

Have a great holiday break!

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Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own (INCLUDING AI-GENERATED MATERIAL), 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. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Support Systems

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

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

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, 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

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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

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

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

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

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, 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

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. 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.