

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

**CTWR 418A: SENIOR THESIS**

**Fall 2023**

**Section: 19200D**

Instructor: Robert Ramsey  
Class Schedule: Thursdays, 1pm – 3:50pm  
Class Location: SCA 245  
Office Hours: By appointment  
Contact Information: robertra@usc.edu

**Course Objective:**

Students will pitch, outline and write first drafts of feature screenplays in the Fall semester, then rewrite those screenplays with the intention of strengthening, clarifying and deepening characters, relationships, themes and story arcs in the Spring semester. The goal is to get every writer to generate the best damn version of their story possible.

**Course Description:**

After a brief review of character arc and three-act, eight-sequence story structure, students will present up to three feature ideas for class discussion. Each student will commit to one idea, refine the logline and pitch the story in 3-5 minutes. Students will then commence outlining their screenplays sequence by sequence. All outline/ treatments will be presented in class by the authors.

The remainder of the semester will be devoted to the drafting and presenting of first drafts of screenplays in a supportive and constructive workshop setting. We will table read all assignments in class, with robust and constructive discussions to follow.

In accordance with the character-based philosophy of this program, we will spend much of our time discussing the INTENTION-DRIVEN PROTAGONIST and how to drop them into the very center of the story by calibrating their EXTERNAL WANTS and INTERNAL NEEDS.

**Suggested Course Reading:**

“The Hollywood Standard: The Complete And Authoritative Guide To Script Format And Style” by Christopher Riley

“Tools of Screenwriting” by David Howard

“Screenwriting is Rewriting” by Jack Epps, Jr.

“The Writer’s Journey” by Christopher Vogler

“Making A Good Script Great” by Linda Seger.

Students should use the industry standard screenwriting software, Final Draft.

**Grading Criteria:**

Participation:	10%
First Pitch:	10%
Treatment:	20%
Rough First Act	20%
Rough Second Act	20%
Rough Third Act	20%
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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%

**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.

**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:**

Laptops are permissible for taking notes. No cell phones.

**Writing Division Attendance Policy:**

Class attendance is mandatory and students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Tardiness is unprofessional and will hold up the business of the class. Please make your best effort to be on time.

If you have a conflict that will cause you to miss class, you need to secure the instructor's approval of that absence in advance of the class. 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. 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.

If you miss class without informing your instructor, it will be considered an unexcused absence. Unexcused absences can lower your final grade for the course. 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 professor.

### **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:**

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

**Week 1. August 24:** Discuss how to build strong features by focusing on the intention-driven protagonist.

ASSIGNMENT #1 (Not Graded): Come up with THREE FEATURE IDEAS. Write a logline for each.

**Week 2. August 31:** Students will present THREE FEATURE IDEAS and choose the one they want to spend the rest of the year writing.

ASSIGNMENT #2 (Graded): Prepare 3-5 MINUTE PITCH for your screenplay.

**Week 3. September 7:** Students will pitch their stories and we will discuss. Break into Groups A and B.

ASSIGNMENT #3 (Graded): Write a TREATMENT for your story with short bios of principal cast, 8-10 pages. Please be advised that the treatment is considered a work in progress. Students will be graded on their final revised treatment.

**Week 4. September 14:** Group A presents treatments in class for discussion.

**Week 5. September 21:** Group B presents treatments in class for discussion.

ASSIGNMENT #5: Start drafting screenplays!

**Week 6. September 28:** Group A presents First and Second Sequences.

**Week 7. October 5:** Group B presents First and Second Sequences.

**Week 8. October 12: Fall Recess.**

**Week 9. October 19:** Group A presents Third and Fourth Sequences.

**Week 10. October 26:** Group B presents Third and Fourth Sequences.

**Week 11. November 2:** Group A presents Fifth and Sixth Sequences.

**Week 12. November 9:** Group B presents Fifth and Sixth Sequences.

**Week 13. November 15:** Group A presents Seventh and Eighth Sequences.

**Week 14. November 23: Thanksgiving Break**

**Week 15. November 30:** Group B presents Seventh and Eighth Sequences.

**Study Days: December 3-6.**

**Upload your REVISED OUTLINE AND FIRST ACT to the Google Drive no later than Friday, December 8, @ 9 pm.**

### **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 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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