

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

**CTWR 505: Writing the Short Script
FALL 2023 – (Two Units, Required, Section #19281)**

Instructor: Steve Armour
Class Schedule: Tuesdays 2:00-4:50pm
Class Location: SCB 101
Office Hours: By appointment
Contact Information: sarmour@usc.edu

*“I thought drama was when the actors cry. But drama is when the audience cries.”
—Frank Capra*

GOALS OF THIS COURSE:

- Ideation: To use memory and experience to develop storytelling skills.
- Character: To learn to create the characters that fuel compelling stories.
- Voice: To explore and develop your artistic point of view and cinematic voice.
- Research: To develop ideas for stories and characters through life experience.
- Visualization: To learn to write visually.
- Technique: To practice the structure and economy of good writing.
- Dramatic Scene: To learn the fundamentals of dramatic scene writing.
- Short Scripts: To learn to write effective, emotional short scripts.
- Rewriting: To develop skills in rewriting.
- Audience: To consider, understand, and develop a responsibility to, an audience

In this course, you will develop your resources as a storyteller—memory and observation, the stories around you, your own imagination—all with the goal of creating compelling characters that drive stories.

Our aim is to equip you with the tools to draw great characters, set them in motion in a richly imagined world, evoke meaningful themes, keep the audience in suspense and release them through a memorable ending—all in a short space of time.

We will begin with visualization, the concept of telling a story with pictures alone. We will write a series of scenes without dialogue that emphasize visual and aural storytelling. Your use of objects and actions, planting and payoff, world, props, costumes, and atmosphere to tell stories will be stretched.

Next, we will add dialogue to our toolbox in a second set of exercises designed to teach you the major building block of cinema: the scene. By exploring our character's goals, intentions, tactics and psychology, we will bring them into conflict, and bring the viewer into suspense.

The class will function as a workshop. Together, we will read and respond to your work, learning how to give and receive useful feedback. These skills are critical components of your future success, whether you hope to be an indie-auteur, a feature writer-for-hire, or you find yourself in a TV writers' room.

During the semester you will generate and workshop your short scripts. **The last half of the semester will be devoted to envisioning, writing and rewriting the 5 page, CTPR 508 screenplay.**

Screenwriting format is not an exact science; within industry norms, you should develop a format style that you find both comfortable and expressive. To this end you will read and analyze three screenplays I will select. By the third class I expect your assignments to be written in a professional format—assignments not meeting that standard will be marked down.

I recommend using Final Draft. If you don't own Final Draft, you can download a free demo version—with watermark—from the Final Draft website (<http://www.finaldraft.com/downloads/demo-final-draft.php>). *Celtx* software program is also available for free.

REQUIRED READING

Screenplays or pilots provided by instructor

SUGGESTED READING

The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writer's Guide to the Craft and Elements of a Screenplay, by David Howard & Edward Mabley

Screenwriting is Rewriting, by Jack Epps, Jr. Bloomsbury Academic, New York, London, 2016, ISBN: 9781628927405

EVALUATION CRITERIA:

CTWR 505 grades will be based the following areas of students' work:

- An understanding of the fundamental principles of ideation, visualization, creating characters, and scene-writing via weekly assignments.
- An understanding of how to write a short script
- An understanding of how to rewrite a scene.
- The ability to read and respond to classmates' work. Class participation includes full involvement in and contribution to all class discussions, as well as reading (in advance at times; see schedule) the assignments of the other students and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.

Homework will be due **2PM MONDAYS** before Tuesday classes unless otherwise noted. Students will submit assignments via **email** as a **PDF document**. The **file names** should consist of the "*student's last name_ assignment name_date.pdf*" (Example: *Gonzales_1st Sequence Revisions_1-15-19.pdf*)

Assignments arriving after 2PM MONDAYS will drop from A to A-. Assignments arriving after 2PM TUESDAYS will drop a full letter grade.

Create a **TITLE PAGE** for each assignment you submit, including title, author name, date and email address. Put your name, the title and page number on the header of **EACH PAGE** of your material. Refer to the **SCHEDULE** for due dates of specific assignments.

I encourage all students to **SEND WHAT YOU HAVE** by the deadline, whether you like it or hate it. You really will learn more from failure than success.

GRADING WEIGHTS:

CTWR 505 grades are based on:

- Weekly writing Assignments.....50%
- Reading and Responding to Workshop Assignments.....20%
- Final 508 Script.....30%

LETTER GRADES:

| | | |
|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| 100-93....A | 82-80....B- | 69-67.....D+ |
| 93-90.....A- | 79-77....C+ | 66-63.....D |
| 89-87.....B+ | 76-73....C | 62-60.....D- |
| 86-83.....B | 72-70....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.

FORMAT: Scripts must be **typed in 12 pt. Courier**

- Name every document you email the group as follows:

Your Name_AssignmentName.Format

*****Create a TITLE PAGE for each assignment you submit, including title, author name, date and email address.**

****** Put your name, the title and page number on the Header of EACH PAGE of your material. Refer to the SCHEDULE for due dates of specific assignments.**

All work must be delivered to the class Dropbox or Blackboard in PDF format or emailed to group (a “reply all” group will be formed) 24 hours before class time.

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 & 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 sensitive 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, snapchatted, or posted anywhere else on the internet. Violations are subject to university disciplinary policy.

Laptop Policy:

Laptops may be used in class but only for purposes of classwork. Students should not be surfing during class time unless instructed otherwise by the instructor. Violation of policy could result in laptop privileges being suspended.

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.

CTWR 505 WEEKLY SCHEDULE

WEEK ONE – Intro to Dramatic Storytelling

In Class: Introduction of the course and overarching objectives.

In Class Assignment: TRIP TO SCHOOL

Tell us about a real event that happened to you on your way to school or on your way home from school. It could be any school and any age.

Discuss: Is this a story? What elements would make it a story or a better story.

Discuss other sources of story ideas beyond your personal memories.

Assignment for Next Week: Read a professional screenplay or TV pilot assigned by your instructor. Be prepared to discuss: Who is the main character? What do they actively want in the story? Who (or what) is the primary source of opposition to their goal?

Assignment for Next Week: Describe one of the following memories in prose:

- Your favorite toy as a child.
- A secret place you used to go.
- The most frightening person from your childhood.

What do you remember seeing and hearing? What emotions do you recall? How would you build a story around this memory?

WEEK TWO – INTRO TO SCREENWRITING TECHNIQUE

In Class: How Scripts Work. Learn Professional Screenplay format and how to use style techniques to express your personal voice. What are the elements used in screenwriting?

Discuss: The style choices made in the screenplay you've read. What are your favorite line(s) of description and why?

Discuss: Memory essay(s). Note the importance of props, characters, locations. What kind of character relationships and conflicts emerged?

Assignment for Next Week: “Preparation for a Date” exercise, written as a mini one to two-page screenplay with correct formatting. (see Appendix)

WEEK THREE – WHAT MAKES A GOOD STORY: Characters Moving Through Conflict and Obstacles: Intro to Story Structure

In Class: How to create three-dimensional characters that that pursue goals and face conflict as they move through your story. The Character Rubric: Beyond Want and Need. Arcs and Arc Symmetry.

What makes effective dialogue and how to develop an ‘ear’ for dialogue.

Discuss: Review/critique “Preparation for a Date.”

Assignment for Next Week: “The Worst Person in the World” 3-4 page screenplay with emphasis on dialogue techniques, tension building, “moment of apparent defeat.” (see Appendix)

WEEK FOUR – ADVANCED STORY TECHNIQUES

In Class: A deeper dive into story

And: How Short Films work: How a Short is the same as - and different from - a Feature.

Screening: Instructors may screen one or several short films.

Discuss: Review/critique “The Worst Person in the World”

Assignment for Next Week: “Seduction/Persuasion” exercise, a 3-4 page screenplay exercise, or other screenplay assignment at instructor's' discretion. (see Appendix) **WEEK FIVE – HOW REALISM WORKS**

In Class: Assign “New Worlds” (see below) and discuss what make a story “realistic” and the different types of realism. What makes a story seem authentic?

To Discuss: Review/critique “Seduction/Persuasion” or other Week 6 Assignment

In Class Exercise: “True/False” (see Appendix)

Assignment for Next Week: “New Worlds” (see Appendix)

WEEK SIX – HOW REALISM WORKS, Part 2

Discuss: Review/critique “Research Project.” Discuss issues and challenges and each student’s research methods. What worked and what didn’t?

Assignment for Next Week: Prepare 3-4 Loglines and Central Questions for at least three 508 ideas*

NB: This is the only assignment after Week 2 due in class (not in advance) and read aloud in class since student feedback and active discussions can spark new ideas.

WEEK SEVEN – TOPIC TBD

In Class: Instructor discretion.

To Discuss: Discuss loglines in a class roundtable. Expand on or edit ideas.

Assignment for Next Week: Revise loglines.

WEEK EIGHT – HOW OUTLINING WORKS PLUS 508 LOGLINES

In Class: How Outlining works: How and why to write a Treatment and Outline.

To Discuss: Listen to and discuss 508 “pitches” (loglines) with 508 Faculty.

****508 Instructors Visit Classes****

Assignment for Next Week: Treatment/Outline hybrid (treatment with act breaks and midpoint) for one (two max if absolutely essential) 508 stories.

WEEK NINE -- HOW TO WRITE A BEATSHEET: THE 508 BEATSHEET

In Class: What exactly is “A Beat” (how a story beat is different from directing/editing beats) and How to Write a Beatsheet.

To Discuss: Critique and Feedback for 508 Treatment/Outlines.

Assignment for Next Week: 508 Beatsheets for the one chosen 508.

WEEK TEN – BEATSHEET FEEDBACK

In Class: Instructor discretion.

To Discuss: Critique and Feedback for 508 Beatsheets

Assignment for Next Week: Write the 508 First Draft (Group A and B)

****At this point in the semester, Instructors may want to A/B the class so that only 6 scripts are being written, covered for notes, and discussed each week.****

(this can also begin the previous week (9) so that the Beatsheets are done over two classes as well)

WEEK ELEVEN – TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES OF THE REWRITE

In Class: How Rewriting works: Tools and Techniques of the Rewrite

Also: How to use Revision Mode in Final Drafts and other programs.

To Discuss: Critique and Feedback for 508 First Drafts (Group A)

Assignment for Next Week: Rewrite: the 508 Second Draft (Group A)

WEEK TWELVE – MODULAR LECTURE PLUS CRITIQUE

In Class: Writing Habits and Workflow Habits and Hacks (or Instructor discretion.)

To Discuss: Critique and Feedback for 508 First Drafts (Group B)

Assignment for Next Week: Rewrite: the 508 Second Draft (Group B)

WEEK THIRTEEN – CRITIQUE

In Class: Instructor Discretion

To Discuss: Critique and Feedback for 508 Second Drafts (Group A)

WEEK FOURTEEN – CRITIQUE

In Class: Instructor Discretion

To Discuss: Critique and Feedback for 508 Second Drafts (Group B)

Assignment for Next Week: All Students should be addressing final notes and preparing a final draft if applicable.

WEEK FIFTEEN – FINAL 508 CRITIQUES AND FINAL EXAM ASSIGNMENTS

In Class: Instructor Discretion

To Discuss: Critique and Feedback for any 508 ‘Final’ Drafts

Assignment for “Final Exam”: Final Polishes and “Final Critique Project” (see **Appendix**) (optional, at Instructor Discretion)

APPENDIX ON FOLLOWING PAGES...

APPENDIX - CLASS ASSIGNMENTS

“Preparation For A Date”

Length: No more than 2 pages total. The First scene, “preparation,” should be 65-70% of your pages. The Second scene, “aftermath.” should be 30-35% of your pages. (this is a helpful guideline, not a rule.)

Assignment: Pick a character and place them in a location significant to that character. (A home, an office, a combat bunker.) Use light, and sound to build mood and atmosphere and sense of place.

Show that 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.

Also: There should be no signs, texts, notes, no written/printed words. Use description to set the scene!

Then, ellipse time and show the character's return to the exact same location. We do not see 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 demeanor, costume, props, etc.

This should be a story, or at least part of one, using the techniques you've just learned.

“The Worst Person in the World” aka “Wrongest [sic] Person”/“Intruder”/
“Wrong Arrival”

Length: 3 - 4 pages

Assignment: This is a dialogue scene between two characters*.

The setup: Character A waits for Character B but Character C shows up first.

Character C should be, from what we know of Character A and their plans, the absolute worst person who could arrive.

Character A must get rid of Character C before they cross paths with character B!

But, character A cannot come out and say exactly why character C must leave.

The audience must know what is being planned and the stakes involved. (But this cannot be conveyed via dialogue on the phone, answering machine, texted etc.)

Character C must be entirely motivated to stay.

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

*You may have Character B speak a *few* words for humorous or dramatic effect, but they must be the last person to speak. **This is a two person scene.**

You may have non-speaking background characters for atmosphere purposes only. They cannot influence the scene in any way, and their presence cannot help or hinder any character's goals. (test: Would this scene be exactly the same without the background character(s) except for realism/accuracy of place?)

C's arrival should not be random, as in 'A prepares dinner for their mother but a robber shows up.' That's too easy. The idea is that C worst person given who B is.

Be sure to keep an eye on:

- 1) Character - They must be unique characters who want something.
- 2) Dialogue - Expressive, Character Revealing, Not overly literal, Distinct voices (rhythm, syntax, word choice, etc).
- 3) Story Structure - If your story ends on a good news beat, you should have a Moment of Apparent Defeat before the final success. If your story ends on a bad news beat, you should have a Moment of Apparent Success before the final defeat.

“True False”

Length: ½ to ¾ page each

Assignment: Write two prose stories, one totally true and the other totally false. Each story is read aloud* in class. The class will vote on which story they believe is true which is false. The “winning” student is the one with the most ‘true’ votes for their fake story.

*NB: To avoid students being able to use the ‘process of elimination’ to pick the true story, the instructor should collect all the stories, randomize them, and read them themselves.

“New Worlds” aka “The Research Project” aka “Professions”

Length: 2 to 4 pages

Assignment: Write a 2-4 page screenplay with two or more people who do/belong to a specific job/sport/hobby/social group you know nothing about.

You'll be graded on the realism of the job/hobby/world details and lifestyle that are expressed in *dialogue* and to a much lesser extent, description. (i.e. you can't just write a really good description of the things you see and call it a day. This is a DIALOGUE exercise!) It's about the lingo, nomenclature, values and rhythms of these characters.

Will we believe you know how two people in a submarine talk and about what? Or a dry cleaner? Or a dentist office? Or two darts champions? We must understand what's going on in the scene and why.

The priority is to write believable characters, not jam the story full of jargon.

No ‘CSI’-Style Dialogue where one character explains their job to someone doing the same job.

NB: Be extremely careful when including “outsiders” and/or neophytes. When an “expert” talks to a “non-expert” (or an “insider” to an “outsider”) they - by the very nature of these roles - have to speak in a way that's accessible and general. The assignment is to do the opposite of that.

“Seduction/Persuasion”

Length: 3 – 4 pages

Assignment: One character (“The Seducer”) wants another character (“The Mark”) to do something. The Seducer should know exactly what leverage to use, or should be able to figure it out. The reward should be appealing to the person being seduced, but that person should have legitimate, character-revealing opposition to doing it. The seduction/ persuasion should escalate to the point where the reader legitimately can’t guess how it will end. The scene ends when The Mark agrees or doesn’t.

“Final Critique Project” (formerly “The Summary Project”)

Length: Total length, including critiques of all 12 scripts should not exceed 6 pages.

Assignment: Students should read each of the 508 final drafts and prepare a brief (approx. ¼ to ½ page each) critique of each script (including their own), highlighting what works and what needs improvement and why. Does the story work? Are the characters compelling? etc.

*Note:: Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure this letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.- 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The telephone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

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. 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 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 Disability Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776 dsp.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.

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