

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
John Wells Division of Writing
CTWR 505: Creating the Short Script
FALL 2023
(Two Units, Required, Section # 19282D)

Instructor: David Howard
Class Schedule: Wednesdays, 9:00-11:50
Class Location: SCA 214
Office Hours: Best by appointment; Tuesdays 10-1
Contact Information: dhoward@cinema.usc.edu

GOALS OF THIS COURSE:

- Character: To strengthen & deepen your ability to conceive characters that will lead to compelling stories.
- Story: To understand what makes good stories and how to craft them for short films.
- Voice: To explore and develop your artistic point of view and original cinematic voice. (*Who are your cinematic heroes and why?*)
- Research: To develop ideas for stories and characters through observation of, research into, and direct experience with real life.
- Visualization: To learn to write from a visual and aural perspective.
- Technique: To understand the structure and *economy* of effective screenwriting.
- Dramatic Scene: To develop a fundamental understanding of the dramatic scene.
- Short Scripts: To learn to write effective and moving short scripts (507 & 508.)
- Rewriting: To understand the importance of rewriting.

This is an introductory course in writing for the screen in which you will develop your resources as a storyteller: your memory and observation, your responsiveness to stories around you, and of course, your imagination, your ability to create and develop compelling dramatic characters and cinematic conflict.

You will learn to bring the inner life of your characters to the screen by using planting and payoff, action and activity, location, props, costume, atmosphere, and motivation. We will discover that it is possible (and indeed necessary) to tell your stories visually, to make them compelling and rich with meaning by using these basic techniques.

Later, we will combine these techniques with dialogue in a second stage of exercises designed to teach you the major building block of cinema – the scene. We will

expand our work with character and study the ingredients necessary to make any scene work. By exploring our character's goals, intentions, or "wants" we will discover that the lifeblood of any scene is **conflict**.

The class will take place in a workshop setting. Together we will read and critique a series of weekly assignments, both non-dialogue and dialogue, designed to help you understand the fundamentals of screenwriting. You will learn to hear your film as you write it, while at the same time you will discover the importance of character as it is explored through situations of conflict. You will also be learning how to be an active member of a "writer's room."

Screenwriting 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, I urge you to read as many professional screenplays as possible. **By the third session, your assignments will be written in a professional format. I recommend using Final Draft.** If you don't own the software, you can download a free demo version—with a 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 such as Celtx are also available for free online.**

READING LIST:

1. *The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writer's Guide to the Craft and Elements of a Screenplay*, by David Howard & Edward Mabley
2. *Creative Filmmaking From the Inside Out*, Dannenbaum, Hodge, Mayer (Fireside, 2003)
3. One feature screenplay or pilot (**required**, provided by instructor)

EVALUATION CRITERIA:

CTWR 505 grades will be based on careful consideration of the following:

- The student must demonstrate an understanding of the fundamental principles of ideation, visualization, creating compelling characters, and writing the scene via the weekly assignments.
- The student must demonstrate an understanding of how to write a short script
- The student must demonstrate an understanding of how to rewrite a scene.
- The student must demonstrate the ability to read and respond to other students' 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.
- Class attendance is mandatory and includes being on time to class (otherwise, the students who present their material first are short-changed).
- You are allowed one unexcused absence (documentation required for excused

- absences). Beyond one, you will receive a reduction of one-third letter grade for each unexcused absence. (e.g., A- down to B+, B down to B-)
- Tardiness is unprofessional and so will be considered unacceptable. You will be allowed one unexcused tardiness. After that, you will have your grade lowered by one-sixth of a letter grade for each occurrence. For example: Two tardies = A- to B+. **BE ON TIME. IT IS HIGHLY INCONSIDERATE OF YOUR CLASSMATES NOT TO BE.**
 - Assignments turned in late will be marked down.

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 in PDF format or emailed to the 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 a 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 *August 23* – MEMORY

Introduction of the course and overarching objectives.

In class assignment – TRIP TO SCHOOL

Tell us an anecdote of 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.

Assignment for next week:

1. Read first assigned script.
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?
Answer these questions in one written paragraph.
2. Write a description of the following personal memories:
 - My favorite object as a child.
 - A secret place I used to go.
 - The most frightening person in my childhood.

Describe the specifics of the object, the person, the place. The feeling and mood they engendered. Up to 1 page prose each.

WEEK TWO *August 30* – MEMORY 2

In Class:

1. Discuss each student's favorite memory prompt: object, place or person
2. Discuss assigned script, both story questions and formatting discoveries.

In Class: Discuss screenplay format, demo Final Draft and basics

Assignments for next week:

1. Write a one page prose story based on one of the four memory prompts (trip to school, object, place or person. Think of it as a five page non-dialogue idea. Could it be basis for a 507 script?)
2. "Preparation for a Date". Write two non-dialogue scenes. [**Screenplay format**. Every sentence is a shot. Use setting, lighting, sound etc., to create atmosphere.]

Designed to build audience engagement and expectation. Introduces the use of props, costume, and character revealing behavior. Helps the writer practice the technique of planting and payoff and elements of three-act structure.

Scene One = Preparation. Scene Two = Aftermath.

Length: Scene One = ½ to 1 page. Scene Two = 1/3 page.

WEEK THREE *September 6* – "PREPARATION FOR A DATE"

In class:

Discuss "Preparation for a Date" stories.

Focus on defining character via description and behavior, planting and payoff.

Discuss one page prose stories.

Discuss formatting (how is writer controlling our experience and understanding on the page.)

Assignment for next week:

- 1 - Unexpected Arrival / Intruder scene. (Dialogue scene.)

This is a dialogue scene between two characters. Should build and employ many of elements already introduced, like preparation, planting and payoff, lighting and sound, etc. Designed to reveal character through conflict, to build suspense through a ticking clock, and to practice dialogue -- including attitude, vernacular/voice, scene/plot, advertising, and exposition.

Length: 3 - 4 pages. Screenplay format.

WEEK FOUR *September 13* – UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL / INTRUDER SCENE

In class:

1. Discuss Intruder scenes.
2. Any lingering questions about format

Assignment for next week:

1. Seduction/persuasion scene, about 3 pages
Two character scene: the seducer and the seducee. Either the seducee is

interested/willing and the circumstances are all wrong or the seducee is reluctant and the circumstances are perfect.

WEEK FIVE *September 20* – SEDUCTION/PERSUASION SCENE

In class:

1. Discuss seduction scenes.
2. Can a scene be the basis for a short film? Its core?

Assignment for next week:

1. The “Research Project”...exploration of a world you know nothing about
2. Find a profession, world, setting, pastime that is new to you, research it enough to make it the basis of a 2-4 page scene between two people...there should be conflict as well as a sense of realism about the setting, language and behavior

WEEK SIX *September 27* – THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In class:

1. Discuss both the world/milieu used but the scenes written about unfamiliar worlds
2. Discuss ideation for potential 508 stories: limitations, parameters, short ideas

Assignments for next week:

Prepare 3-4 loglines and central questions for potential 508 scripts

WEEK SEVEN *October 4* – PITCHING 508 IDEAS

In class:

1. Discuss variety of loglines and script ideas for quality of story AND producibility in 508 context
2. Discuss crucial scenes that will be core of the story
3. Discuss the three acts, proportions and emphasis in short films

Assignment for next week:

1. Further develop two of the pitched ideas .
2. Set aside as unsuitable or uninteresting at least one of the pitched ideas
DO NOT SET ASIDE ALL STORIES, DEVELOP SOME FURTHER
3. Create at least one more idea with story and producibility in mind

NOTE: 508 instructor will visit class and workshop 508 story ideas next week

WEEK EIGHT *October 11* – WORKSHOPPING 508 IDEAS

In class: with visiting 508 instructor, workshop as many pitches as possible

In class: the anatomy of a short script, outline/treatments explained, time in character life

Assignments for next week:

1. Outline/treatment in prose with act breaks...best story idea
2. Further develop one other story idea...you never know what will gel

WEEK NINE *October 18* -- OUTLINE/TREATMENTS

1. Discuss the stories: what is realistic length, producibility, is it interesting?
2. Making final decisions on which story to write/pursue for 508

In class: discuss beats, beat sheets, the experience of the character, experience of the Audience, who knows what/when

Assignment for next week:

1. Refine the prose treatment
2. Create a beat sheet for the film

WEEK TEN *October 25* – BEAT SHEETS

1. Discuss beat sheets and the order of revelation to audience, to character.
2. Discuss story, character, conflict, externalization, emphasis

Assignments for next week:

1. Revise the beat sheet for order and story emphasis
2. Write the first draft 508 script from revised beat sheet and outline
3. Divide into Group A and Group B

WEEK ELEVEN *November 1* – FIRST DRAFT 508 SCRIPT, GROUP A

1. Discuss first draft scripts Group A

Assignment for next week:

1. Group A start revisions
2. Group B complete/revise first draft for next week

WEEK TWELVE *November 8* – FIRST DRAFT 508 SCRIPT, GROUP B

1. Discuss first draft scripts Group B

Assignment for next week:

1. Group B start revisions
2. Group A write second draft for next week

WEEK THIRTEEN *November 15* – SECOND DRAFT 508, GROUP A

1. Discuss second draft, Group A.

Assignment for next week:

1. Begin script polish, Group A
2. Group B write second draft for next week

WEEK FOURTEEN *November 22* – SECOND DRAFT 508, GROUP B

1. Discuss second draft, Group B
2. Discuss polishing versus rewriting

Assignment for next week:

- 1 – Polish scripts, Group A and B

WEEK FIFTEEN *November 29* – POLISHED 508 SCRIPTS

1. Discuss polishes of of 508 scripts.

WEEK SIXTEEN *December 6* – STUDY DAYS. NO CLASSES.**WEEK SEVENTEEN *December 13* – DELIVER FINAL DRAFT OF 508 SCRIPT**

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

*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.

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