

School of Cinematic Arts
Writing Division
CTWR 523: Introduction to the Screenplay
Section 19341
Tues 7-10pm, SCA 363
Fall 2023
Professor: Siavash Farahani
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COURSE OVERVIEW:

This is an introductory course to writing the first draft of a full-length screenplay. Students will be guided through ideation, outlining and writing of a first draft. Emphasis will be placed on telling character driven narratives with well-structured plots to tell dramatically compelling stories. The central theme of the class is Frank Daniel's motto "a good story, well-told".

COURSE OBJECTIVE:

Developing a feature-length idea, both orally (class pitch) and in written form. Students will write a step outline, then write a feature screenplay to be completed by semester's end. Besides story elements, students are encouraged to understand why they are choosing to write their particular story. How does it speak to them, their interests or experience?

COURSE GOALS:

- Developing an idea into a feature screenplay outline, and a first draft.
- Creating unique characters with strong inner lives and complex relationships.
- Establishing a clear personal connection to drive and enliven the story.
- Deepening understanding of narrative cinematic technique and structure.
- Acquiring complete command of format, visual writing style, and dialogue.
- Removing the preciousness while learning to make decisions and work fast.

Students should anticipate 10-12 pages of writing PER WEEK. The final screenplay must be no less than 95 pages and no more than 110 pages when formatted according to industry standards (Final Draft).

This is a workshop class where you will be expected to contribute. As such, your attendance and participation are mandatory for the process and your final grade.

Our class time will be divided between lecture, discussion and in-class table readings of your pages, with emphasis on the latter. Students will be broken up into reading groups, with an

alternating weekly rotation. Depending on progress, we may also have guest speakers and in-class screenings towards the end of the semester.

Required Reading/Viewing:

The Tools of Screenwriting by Howard/Mabley

Save the Cat by Blake Snyder

Writing for Emotional Impact by Karl Iglesias

We will be referring to these texts regularly so please read all ASAP. Additionally, we will read and discuss at least one screenplay from a recent major motion picture (to be determined). You will also be expected to watch movies and scenes outside of class.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1 08/22/23

Introductions and discussion of expectations for the semester.

Lecture: A Good Story Well told.

The first step in feature development: how to develop and manage ideas, and address broad questions regarding potential stories: genre, tone, audience and the writer's connection to the material. "Is this a movie?" How to write a logline.

Assignment:

Write 3 loglines for potential development into a feature script for the semester. Due by next class.

Week 2 08/29/23

Pitch your 3 loglines to class for feedback and choose which idea to develop as your screenplay for the semester. Shaping the story. Discuss pitches and expand story beats.

Assignment:

1) Develop your pitch. Select one of the loglines to pursue as your project for the semester. Identify protagonist, antagonist, central goal and conflict.

- 2) Write a one paragraph synopsis of the story as envisioned thus far.
- 3) Write a one paragraph monologues for both the protagonist and antagonist in their own voice as they recount a significant event in their life.
- 4) Write a scene with conflict introducing your main character and the world of the story.

Week 3 09/05/23

Read and discuss last week's assignments. Continue to develop and shape stories. Break into GROUP A & B writing sections. Transforming synopsis into 3 act breaks and sequences for outline.

Assignment: Create the outline for your screenplay. (Note: the outline is a living document that will be discussed and modified repeatedly throughout the semester as your story takes shape.)

Week 4 09/12/23

Discuss and trouble shoot outlines. Find comparable film to study for structure, character introductions and other elements.

Assignment: Both groups start writing Act I, Seq1. (12-15 pages)

Week 5 09/19/23

GROUP A table read Act I, Seq 1. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: Keep writing Act I.

Week 6 09/26/23

GROUP B table read Act I, Seq 1. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: Keep writing Act I. Group A will table read Act I, Seq 2 in class next week. (12-15 pages)

Week 7 10/03/23

GROUP A table read ACT I, Seq 2. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: Both groups continue writing. Group B will read ACT 1, Seq 2 next week (12-15 pgs).

Week 8 10/10/23

GROUP B table read ACT I, Seq 2. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment : both groups work on Act II, Seq 1&2

Week 9 10/17/23

GROUP A table read ACT II, Seq 1 & 2.

Assignment : keep working on Act II, Seq 1&2

Week 10 10/24/23

GROUP B table read Act II, Seq 1&2. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: Keep working on Act II, Seq 3&4

Week 11 10/31/23

GROUP A table read Act II, Seq 3&4. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: Start working on Act III,Seq 1&2

Week 12 11/07/23

GROUP B table read Act II, Seq 3&4. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: Keep working on ACT III, Seq 1&2

Week 13 11/14/23

GROUP A table read Act III, Seq 1&2. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: Keep working on Act III, Seq 1&2

Week 14 11/21/23

GROUP B table read Act III, Seq 1&2. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: Keep working on Act III, Seq 1&2

Week 15 11/28/23

Last class. “You’ve completed a feature script. Now what?”

Discussion of the next step in the feature writing and development process, from re-writing to submission to contests, to possible representatives, and production companies.

PLEASE NOTE: it is understood not everyone will reach the finish line at the same time. For this reason, you are allotted two additional weeks from final class to submit the completed screenplay.

******COMPLETED SCREENPLAY (no less than 95 and no more than 110 pages) is DUE by 7pm December 12, 2023**

Grading Criteria/Evaluation:

While there are many great and varied storytelling traditions in the world, this class focuses exclusively on the Western tradition, particularly as it is practiced in Hollywood studio system today.

This includes a three act narrative with all its structural components as taught during the semester including - but not limited to – Prologue, Status Quo, Catalyst, Main Tension, Midpoint, Climax, Resolution, Epilogue etc. All with an eye towards a character driven story

with maximum dramatic impact and audience participation.

Great emphasis will be placed on creating compelling/multidimensional characters with clear goals, needs, obstacles, conflicts and transformations. This includes believable and well-rounded protagonists and antagonist who display a range of human of emotions and behaviors, whose wants, needs, choices and action drive the story.

Your work will be evaluated based on your attention to character development and arc, plot structure, scene work, themes, visuals, cinematic appeal and, last but not least, proper format and grammar.

You will also be graded you on your ability to receive and give feedback and make the necessary improvements while tapping into your unique voice and imagination.

PLEASE NOTE: This being an introductory FICTIONAL NARRATIVE SCREENPLAY course with a compressed schedule, the instructor reserves the right at his sole discretion to exclude an idea for a screenplay that is deemed too complex or beyond the scope of this class.

Examples of stories not taught in this class include (but are not limited to):

Revisions of pre-existing screenplays. (You must write an original story)

Documentaries

Adaptations

Stories to which the student does not have the underlying rights

Autobiography/Biography/True life/Legacy

Musicals

Ensemble pieces that do not have a central protagonist

Complex historical stories that require intensive research

Nonlinear

Experimental

*****UNLESS OTHERWISE INSTRUCTED ALL WORK IS DUE IN PDF FORMAT BY NOON ON THE DAY OF CLASS UPLOADED TO CLASS DROPBOX*****

Grading Breakdown:

Logline, Monologues and Outline	15% (5% each)
Act I	25%
Act II	25%
Act III	25%
Participation	10%

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.

Classroom decorum:

We must respect each other, our collaboration, and the work at hand. No cell-phones, food nor beverages, except water. No computers, except when allowed for class purposes. Disruptive behavior will not be tolerated.

Expectation of professionalism and academic integrity:

All submitted 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.

Additionally all submitted work must be original, created by the individual student. Any plagiarism or use of AI writing programs will result in an automatic failed grade.

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.

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.

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