

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

CTWR 523 Introduction to the Screenplay
Section 19305R, 4.0 Units
Fall 2023

Instructor: Rob Edwards
Class Schedule: Wednesdays, 7:00 – 10:00 PM
Location: SCA 362
Office Hours: By appointment
Email: robedwar@usc.edu

Course Goals:

- Develop an idea into a feature screenplay outline and a first draft.
- Create unique characters with strong inner lives and complex relationships.
- Establish a clear personal connection to drive and enliven the story.
- Deepen understanding of narrative cinematic technique and structure.
- Acquire professional command of format, visual writing style, and dialogue.
- Remove the preciousness while learning to make decisions and work fast.

Course Objective:

To develop a feature-length idea both orally (in a class pitch) and in written form. With particular focus on character development and the main character's arc, students will write a step outline (developing it from beat sheet to detailed 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 Overview and Instructor Philosophy:

Any good screenplay involves art and craft. As the instructor of this class, I will do my very best to teach you the craft as I understand it and provide a safe environment where you can bring out your own art—i.e., your unique voice as a writer and filmmaker. Nothing will make me more satisfied than seeing you effectively tell the story you want to tell, the way you want to tell it.

The thorny word in that sentence is “effectively.” You may have built an amazing world in your head that you've populated with nuanced characters you know audiences will love forever. But if you can't communicate that vision effectively—so it lives in the imaginations of others—it's a dead thing on arrival. It's not enough to speak (or write) your unique and special voice, you need others to hear it through every word you put on the page.

So, in this class you have two equally important roles:

One as **writer**, writing and revising your assignments each week, integrating all the skills you're learning, daring to put a piece of yourself into each word, then distributing it to the class by the established deadlines.

And two, as **reader/listener**. Each week when your classmates send out their pages or read their work aloud, your job is to receive, digest, and offer constructive feedback.

To make your projects real as production students, I know you need to fight a myriad of people and elements on a daily basis. But in this class you're working a different, opposite muscle—and your biggest fight will be inward—so it's vital you leave your armor at the door.

In this protected environment, constructive feedback means simply answering the question, "Did they get across what they tried to express?" And if not, offering suggestions on how they might have reached you more effectively. You're not a critic pronouncing whether something is good or bad. You're not there to write anyone's script for them. And always, always, always start with what works. In this class we will take every opportunity to appreciate and celebrate each other's good work, so there's a baseline of trust. It's the only way to foster an environment where the risk-taking necessary for great writing can take place. It must be safe to try things that *don't* work. It must be safe to fail.

And it must be safe to share. Deeply and honestly. Tapping into the places where you are most vulnerable and using it on the page is the way you will find and hone your voice. You deserve that rare, safe space in this class, but to have it, you must also give it to everyone else. Each role is equally important. And each will teach you a whole lot about screenwriting and about effective creative collaboration—and about life—if you do it right.

You have one more vital role as we get deeper into the semester. If you haven't done it before, you will find that writing a full-length screenplay is a painful marathon up a mountain, and you will need all your discipline and every skill you can learn to make it through and not get lost in the woods of the Second Act. So mentally and physically prepare yourselves now, and remember, that while *your job* is to finish your script this semester, *your mission* is to leave no one behind.

On the following page you'll find the course schedule. I expect you to keep up with the very brisk pace of assigned writing (approximately **10–15 pages per week** to get you through to the end of your script by Weeks Eleven/Twelve). But you **must also** diligently read each other's work; offer consistent, motivating encouragement; and provide constructive feedback/help in class when your compatriots can't see a clear path through their own forest and trees. If you do this as a team, you'll not only get more out of the course, your writing will be far richer for it.

We have a ton of material to cover and an astonishing number of Monday holidays to work around, not to mention each class will be a living, breathing "happening," driven by the work you bring each week, what we discuss, and what may be needed to help everyone produce the best finished drafts possible. Thus, this schedule is subject to change (always for the better).

Know that, no matter what happens, all of you will do great writing this quarter. Perhaps even the best of your life so far. But, we'll only know by you all getting to the end of your new screenplays. I look forward to the journey.

COURSE SCHEDULE – Fall 2023
(Subject to change at instructor's discretion.)

<p>August 21: Pre-Class Assignment</p>	<p>Pre-Class Assignment due Monday, August 19, 2023: <i>(Send earlier if you have it ready.)</i></p> <p>Send an e-mail introducing yourself to me at robedwar@usc.edu. It should include one or two paragraphs on what you'd like me to know about you. I'll keep it absolutely confidential, and it's truly up to you on how you use it. This is all about the one-on-one connection you'd like to build with me as your instructor</p> <p><i>If you'd like, as part of this introduction, you may send me up to five pages of a sample script you've already written or share a link to one of your short films (up to 10 minutes).</i></p>
<p>August 23: Class One</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course introduction, expectations. • Class introductions: Let's get to know each other. • Lecture: Why We Tell Stories • Workshop: <i>Pitch two story ideas</i> and receive feedback from the class. • Go over assignments for the next two weeks. <p>Assignment due August 28: Spend the week journaling (preferably by hand) about your two ideas: the characters in each. How you relate to them, what they want, what's haunting them, what haunting you about them, scenes you vividly see, your reaction to feedback you received in class, etc. By the deadline email me (not the class) a PDF of your journal pages (take a photo of any handwritten) and tell me your choice on the story you feel called to write.</p>
<p>August 30: Class Two</p>	<p>Lecture: The Character Grid and The Quad.</p> <p>Assignment due Monday 9/4: For the story you've chosen, use the Worksheet on Your Main Characters to prepare full character grids for each of your main characters: C+) Their skillset, C-) Their weaknesses, G+) Their goals, G-) Their antagonist or antagonistic forces.</p>

<p>September 6: Class Three</p>	<p>Discuss "Forks in the Road" for Acts 1 and 3. How do your character reverse themselves between Acts 1 and 3?</p>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lecture: <i>The Relationship Between Character Arc and Story Structural Beats</i> <p>Assignments due Monday 9/11: 1, Write your Beat Sheet – First Draft with particular focus on the main character’s points of change and how they relate to the exterior plot. <i>(15 key structural beats)</i> 2. Read The Fabelmans script by Class Three, 9/13.</p>
September 13: Class Four	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss <i>Beat Sheet – First Drafts</i>. Lecture: <i>Structuring First Acts and Third Acts: The End Is In the Beginning</i> <i>Some Other Useful Screenwriting Concepts: Heart, Head & Hand; Fractals; Clocks; What is “Theme”?; The Unity of Opposites; Dialogue Trips & Tricks, etc.</i> <p>Assignment due Monday 9/18: Further develop your beat sheet into your Revised Beat Sheet, with particular focus on the First and Third Acts and the exterior plot’s relationship to the main character’s change. Add in as many Second Act points as you can. Keep each beat as concise as possible. <i>(Approximately 40 beats: less for a drama, more for a comedy or action movie.)</i></p>
September 20: Class Five	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss <i>Revised Beat Sheets</i>. Lecture: <i>The Secret to Structuring Second Acts and the Use of Subplots (The Oppositional and Encouraging Forces that Make Your Main Character Change)</i> <p>Assignment due by Monday 9/25: Add sluglines, more description, and additional scenes to create your Outline – Rough Drafts <i>(approximately 7–8 pages)</i>.</p>
September 27: Class Six	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss <i>Outline – Rough Drafts</i> and how to revise and expand them into your <i>Final Draft Outlines</i>. Lecture 1: <i>Thematic Tension: How it Makes Good Scripts Great</i>. Lecture 2: <i>Writing Great Openings – Everything Depends on Your First Three Pages</i> <p>Assignment due Monday 10/2: Revise and expand your rough draft into your Final Draft Outlines. Send it out with a cover e-mail with any specific questions you would like feedback on.</p>
October 4: Class Seven	<p>Class will give notes on Final Outlines.</p> <p>Lecture: <i>How to Break the Rules Without Breaking Your Screenplay</i></p> <p>E-mail or use Calendly to schedule optional one-on-ones with me</p>

	<p>(by Zoom), if you have remaining questions before moving onto your scripts.</p> <p>Assignment due by Monday 10/9: Write first 10–15 pages of your screenplay. (Act 1, Part 1) Writing target: Page 15</p>
October 11: Class Eight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss first 10–15 pages of screenplay to page 15. (<i>Act 1, Part 1 – Opening Hook, Ordinary World, Inciting Action</i>) • Lecture 1: Structural Differences Between Comedies, Dramas, and Animated Films. • Lecture 2: <i>How to Build Momentum to the End of Act One</i> <p>Assignment due by Monday 10/16: Write next 10–15 pages of screenplay. (Act 1, Part 2) Writing target: Page 30</p>
October 18: Class Nine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss next 10–15 pages to page 30. (<i>Act 1, Part 2 – Consequence/Refusal of Call, Handshake, Point of No Return</i>) • Lecture 1: The Promise of the Premise, “Fun and Games,” “The Poster” and “The Pinch”: Welcome to Act 2A (<i>Act 2A: Part 1</i>) • Lecture 2: Conflict, Part 3—How Conflict Makes for Great Dialogue (<i>in What’s Said, What’s Meant, and What’s Not Said at All</i>) • Assignment due Monday 10/23, write next 10-15 pages. Writing target Page 45 (everyone reads 5).
October 25: Class Ten	<p>Lecture: The Act Two Midpoint: Haters Become Lovers, The Hunter Becomes The Hunted.</p> <p>Assignment due Monday 10/30: Write next 10-15 pages of screenplay (Act 2A: Parts 1 and 2) Writing target: Page 60</p> <p>On reviewing your classmates pages this week: As there will be a hefty number of pages coming in, you’ll each be assigned to read five (5) of your classmates’ pages and will be doing face-to-face meetings with each of them in our next class. In preparation read the short lecture I will send on The Art of Giving and Receiving Notes in a Professional Setting and be prepared with well thought out notes to discuss in your meetings.</p>
November 1: Class Eleven	<p>One-On-One Note Meetings Discuss next 25–30 pages of screenplay to page 60 in one-on-one pairs for approximately 20 minutes. A total of five meetings: 10 minutes giving notes, 10 minutes receiving notes. (<i>Act 2A: Parts 1 and 2 – Struggle in the New World, Adaptation, Crossroads/Midpoint</i>)</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lecture: Dark Clouds Over Unknown Terrain: The Second Half of Act Two aka The Return Home and The Second Act “Pinch” (“Act 2B: Part 1 & 2”) <p>Assignment due by Monday 11/6: Write next 10–15 pages of screenplay. (Act 2B: Part 1, “2B1”) Writing target: Page 75</p>
<p>November 8: Class Twelve</p>	<p>Discuss next 10–15 pages of screenplay to page 75. (Act 2B1 – <i>Heading Home</i>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lecture 1: Antagonist-Palooza: The Antagonist Moves In, Why So Many Act 2s End With The Protagonist Tied to a Chair (Act 2B2) Lecture 2: Script Format and Writing Action: The Rules, Breaking Them, and Making the White of the Page Work For You <p>Assignment due Monday 11/13: Write next 10–15 pages of screenplay. (Act 2: Part 2B and possibly Act 3: Part 1) Writing target: Page 90</p>
<p>November 15: Class Thirteen</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review next 10–15 pages of screenplays to page 90. (Act 2B2 – <i>Antagonist-palooza</i> Act 3: Part 1 – <i>Aftermath, Catalyst, Plan, Epiphany</i>) Lecture: The Third Act – Bringing It Home and Landing with a Flourish Discuss who will be ready to turn in completed scripts for discussion focus next week. <p>Assignment due Monday 11/20: Write next 10–15 pages of screenplay. (Act 3: Part 2 - “New World Order”) Writing target: Page 105 (Completed First Drafts for some)</p> <p>Early Bird First Drafts due Monday, November 20 – Half of the class. <i>Students who have written faster or wrote shorter screenplays will turn in their first drafts.</i></p>
<p>November 22: THANKSGIVING (NO CLASS)</p>	<p>UNIVERSITY HOLIDAY - NO CLASS</p> <p>Assignment due on the Monday after Thanksgiving 11/27: Send notes on your fellow classmates’ final 10–15 pages to page 105 (Act 3: Part 2 –<i>New World Order</i>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Since we don’t have class, read the lecture I will send you on Revising Your First Draft

	<p>Assignment due by Monday 11/27: Those who have finished, read and revise your first drafts. Those who haven't yet finished, write last 10–15 pages to finish your first drafts (Act 3: Part 2) and send out. Writing target: Page 115 ideal max</p> <p>ALL First Drafts due by Monday, November 27. <i>ALL students MUST turn in their completed first drafts by this date, if they haven't already done so earlier.</i></p> <p>Note: Everyone must bring a HARD COPY printout of their completed scripts to class on April 17.</p>
<p>November 29: Class Fourteen Final Exam</p>	<p>All Final Drafts of Scripts due by 12 noon on Wednesday, December 13, 2023.</p> <p><i>As your final exam, your polished final drafts of your completed screenplays must be emailed to me as PDFs no later than 12 noon on Wednesday, December 13, 2023.</i> <i>If you have completed your polishes sooner than that, I encourage you to turn in your scripts early. Review Climaxes of Completed First Drafts (Remaining half of the class). Discuss final 10–15 pages of screenplays to page 115.</i> <i>(Act 3: Part 2 – New World Order)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lecture: <i>It's a Different Animal on the Real Page: The Hard Copy Polish Process</i> • Concluding Remarks <p>Continuing Assignment: Following the techniques we go over in class, read your script on the page and mark edits there (doing a final check for grammar, spelling errors, format mistakes, and typos), then input all changes into the file and print and check again to be sure nothing was missed.</p>

Classroom Protocol:

All written assignments will be due by **11:59 PM on the Monday preceding our Wednesday class**. This is a firm deadline, please be sure to deliver your work in time to meet it. (Your classmates nor I are obliged to read nor offer comments on any work submitted after the deadline. It is by our discretion only.) All assignments must be submitted in **PDF format**. (In your first class I will confirm exactly where/how they should be turned in). In advance of our Monday class, *you must read everyone's submitted work* (unless the weekly assignment specifies otherwise) and come prepared with your notes, ready to discuss each other's work. In advance of class, I will tell everyone the order in which we will be discussing everyone's work. It will vary each week, with each person having a chance to be in every timeslot. If your work includes changes to previously submitted material, those changes must be marked (starred.)

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:

Our goal in class is to have everyone mentally present and one-hundred percent engaged during all discussions. To this end, only the person whose work is being discussed may have an open laptop, for the purpose of taking notes. All other laptops should be closed. Please print out your notes on your classmates' work so you may refer to them in class. And please wait until class time to share your notes, so everyone may benefit from your insights, and every idea feels fresh and inspires both the receiver and others in the room.

Please remember to keep the tone of discussion collaborative, generous, and noncompetitive. The safer everyone feels in discussion, the more likely it will be that you are free to explore and express your creative convictions.

Required Reading

All students in class are required to read the following:

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

An excellent overview of the basics of screenwriting (and a quick read!).

- ***The Fabelmans***

An Academy Award nominee for Best Original Screenplay written by Steven Spielberg and Tony Kushner. I will e-mail you the PDF. **(Read by Class Three, 9/11/23.)** Also, be sure to see the movie as soon as you can, preferably on the big screen.

Recommended Reading

When I discuss some key topics this quarter, I'll draw on some specific, really useful material found in these books. If you want to go deeper, I highly suggest you read them for yourselves.

- For more on **story structure**:
Classical Storytelling and Contemporary Screenwriting: Aristotle and the Modern Scriptwriter by Brian Price
- For more on **writing from character** (just published and includes lots of current movies and television shows):

The Protagonist's Journey: An Introduction to Character-Driven Screenwriting and Storytelling by Scott Myers

- For his chapter on **scene writing**:
Write Screenplays That Sell the Ackerman Way by Hal Ackerman
- For his chapter on **dialogue**:
Screenplay: Writing the Picture by Robin U. Russin and William Missouri Downs

In class, I'll also give you a more comprehensive list of other great books, websites, and podcasts on writing and film.

Recommended Viewing / Reading

There's a huge list of movies I could pull from. I've listed some of the most highly regarded and successful movies below. Many of them are used frequently in development meeting and are good examples of the principles I'll be discussing in class so familiarize yourself with them (especially the ones I wrote.) Note: I will be adding others after I hear your pitches to familiarize you with other comparable movies that are either in your genre or that have similar structures to the movies you are writing in class.

The Princess and the Frog (2009, screenplay by Ron Clements, John Musker and Rob Edwards)

Treasure Planet (2002, screenplay by Ron Clements, John Musker and Rob Edwards)

Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981, screenplay by Lawrence Kasdan, story by George Lucas and Philip Kaufman)

Top Gun (1986, written by Jim Cash & Jack Epps Jr) *

Tootsie (1982, screenplay by Larry Gelbart and Murray Schisgal)

Star Wars (A New Hope) (1977, written by George Lucas) *

Little Miss Sunshine (2006, written by Michael Arndt)

Die Hard (1988, screenplay by Jeb Stewart and Steven E. de Souza) *

Jojo Rabbit (2019, written by Christine Leunens and Taika Waititi)

Booksmart (2019, written by Emily Halpern & Sarah Haskins and Susanna Fogel and Katie Silberman)

The Fabelmans (2022, written by Steven Spielberg and Tony Kushner)

** Indicates films that frequently come up during studio meetings*

GRADING CRITERIA:

Class critique and discussion 25%

Weekly written assignments 35%

First Draft of Feature Screenplay: 40%

As per Writing Division policy the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:

A 100% to 94% A- 93% to 90% B+ 89% to 87% B 86% to 83% B- 82% to 80% C+ 79% to 77%

Expectation of Professionalism:

C 76% to 73% C- 72% to 70% D+ 69% to 67% D 66% to 63% D- 62% to 60% F 59% to 0%

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 **carefully proof** all your

assignments prior to submission. (If you are not a native English speaker, please have native English-speaking friends proofread your work before submission. The professional script-reading world of Hollywood will not move forward any scripts with errors, so this is a “best practice” you should adopt immediately.)

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.

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 (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 equals 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.

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 genderbased 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-ordiscrimination/>

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