

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
The John Wells Division of
Writing for Screen and Television

CTWR 409: **Fundamentals of Screenwriting: Character, Conflict, & Story**
(4 units) #19406

Instructor: Rick Parks
Location: SCB 207
Time: THURSDAYS 10-12:50 PM (beginning 08/24)
Hours: by appointment
Contact: rickpark@usc.edu
(818) 262-8091 (cell/text)

Course Objective:

To learn the professional approach of writing relatable characters, in conflict driven scenes, with an authentic voice. In addition, students will learn screenplay structure and how to create a compelling world. The culmination of this course will be a full beat sheet and the first of 25-30 pages (or act 1) of a feature script.

Course Description:

As an introductory course for non-majors, "Fundamentals of Screenwriting" is a fundamental course that focuses on the craft of storytelling.

As it's 4 units, there will be work.

You will largely be graded on meeting deadlines.

The focus will be on discovering your creative voice, the mechanics of scene work, creating compelling character arcs, and understanding the formatting structure of feature films.

Through scene work, character work, and story development, students will learn the tools of crafting professional scenes.

AGAIN: The culmination of this course will be a **full beat sheet** and the first of 25-30 pages (or act 1) of a feature script.

Course Reading:

Books:

Save the Cat by Blake Snyder

The Tools of Screenwriting by David Howard and Edward Mabley

Screenplays (provided):

"Iron Man" by Matt Holloway & Art Marcum and Mark Fergus & Hawk Ostby

"Enough Said" by Nicole Holofcener

"Galaxy Quest" by David Howard & Robert Gordon
"Beasts of the Southern Wild" by Lucy Alibar and Benh Zeitlin
Additional reading as assigned by instructor*

HOMEWORK/ASSIGNMENTS:

CTWR 505 is a WORKSHOP. Assignments turned in late will result in a lower grade.

Assignments Are due no later than 24 hours BEFORE each class, (AKA: 10AM Wednesdays) unless requested by the instructor. Remember, YOU are responsible for the instructor receiving your work.

- **Name every document** you email me or the group as follows:

Your FIRST Name - Assignment Name - Format

Example: **RICK-memory.doc**, or **RICK-memory.pdf** or **RICK-memory.fdx**

Grading Criteria:

Participation: 10%
Scene: Conflict 5%
Scene: Atmosphere 5%
Scene: Payoff 5%
Scene: Character 5%
Scene: Dialog 5%
Scene: Rewrite 5%
Character Bios: 15%
Outline: 15%
First Act 30%

100%

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

A 100% to 94%	C 76% to 73%
A- 93% to 90%	C- 72% to 70%
B+ 89% to 87%	D+ 69% to 67%
B 86% to 83%	D 66% to 63%
B- 82% to 80%	D- 62% to 60%
C+ 79% to 77%	F 59% to 0%

Expectation of Professionalism:

All material is expected to be turned in on time and in the proper format. Assignments will be penalized for grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, format mistakes, and typos.

Please proof your assignments prior to submission.

Consideration is given to those for whom ENGLISH is not their native language.

Recording Devices:

You may not record lectures or workshops without the consent of the instructor.

Writing Division Attendance Policy:

Class attendance is mandatory and students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Tardiness is unprofessional and will hold up the business of the class. Please make your best effort to be on time. If you have a conflict that will cause you to miss class, you need to secure the instructor's approval of that absence in advance of the class. Excused absences can include, but are not limited to: illness, both physical and mental; death of a loved one; personal emergency; sporting events (for Student-Athletes) or other university-sponsored activities; religious holidays, and so on. In addition, due to current Covid protocols, if you are feeling ill, without time to test before class, please notify your instructor, do not attend class and get a test. If you test positive, inform your instructor and quarantine for the Health Department's designated period of time. If you miss class without informing your instructor, it will be considered an unexcused absence. Unexcused absences can lower your final grade for the course. If you find you must miss class due to personal emergency or personal crisis, please contact your professor as soon as possible so they can assist you in finding the appropriate University care and guidance. Your health and well-being are of utmost importance to the Wells Writing Division and to your professor.

NOTE: Exceptions will be made in the case of religious holidays and DSP accommodations.

NOTE: CTWR 409 only meets once a week and attendance is a vital component for your success.

Please note that if you are a Writing for Screen and Television major/minor you must receive a grade of a C or better in order to receive degree credit. If you have any questions about the minimum grade required for credit please check with your home department.

If you have an emergency and/or know you will miss class please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

In the case of medical emergencies, family emergencies, or allowances needed for personal well-being, all concerns must be communicated and approved by the Instructor.

If there is a difference of opinion, the student can contact the Writing Division at (213) 740-3303 or writing@cinema.usc.edu

If a student has an emergency and additional accommodations are needed, those

accommodations will need to come through the USC Campus Support and Intervention (CSI) office. The Writing Division recommends the student and/or advocate contact CSI

at 213-821-4710 and their home department adviser for additional support.

Please be aware that if you are a Writing for Screen and Television major/minor you must receive a grade of a C or better in order to receive degree credit. If you have any questions about the minimum grade required for credit, please check with your home department.

Class Schedule:

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

THERE ARE NO CLASSES OCTOBER 12TH-13TH AND NOVEMBER 22-26TH

Week 1: Introductions. Introduction to Course / Rules of Screenwriting lecture / Finding Unique Characters/Ideating

Screening/HW: "Iron Man"

Reading/breakdown: "Iron Man" (provided)

Assignment #1:

PIVOTAL PERSON (direct conflict- *antagonist*) part one (PROSE--not to be shared with the class)

Describe in detail an event in your life where someone "pushed your buttons" and made you react to their intent in a completely unexpected way; someone who changed you in a moment and made you see yourself or the world differently. Writing from an emotional place. (2-6 pages max)

Week 2: Discuss Iron Man/ Developing conflict from emotional story of characters/ Discuss screenplay Ideas

Reading: "Enough Said" (provided)

Assignments #2:

Write ATMOSPHERE scene [PROSE] (5%)

Designed to build the writer's sense of a compelling location.

The goal is to engage the audience without introducing action, through light, use of sound, and visuals. --.

Length: No more than a page total.

Make the audience expect something to happen. In three parts: 1. Fear. 2. Romance. 3. Comedy.

The assignment in detail: Pick a cinematic location. Describe the sights and sounds of that location in order to make the audience think that something romantic is about to take place. The scene ends when your character enters the location. Repeat with the same location, but use the sights and sounds to make the audience expect that something frightening or violent is going to take place.

As before, the scene ends when the same character enters the scene. Repeat a third time using sights and sounds to make the audience expect something humorous is about to happen. These scenes and/or moments are not connected into a larger story. Time can pass. (A location that is vibrant and full of life can be run-down and old, for example.) Also, the fear or love or laughs should not come from the character's interaction or movement. The goal is to get the audience to expect something will happen. Bad example: Show the banana peel, but not the man slipping....)

PIVOTAL PERSON (part two)

Week 3: Workshop Scenes of Atmosphere / Utilizing Plant and Payoff in your work to create tension for audiences/ Finish discussing screenplay ideas

Screening/HW: "Galaxy Quest"

Reading/breakdown: Galaxy Quest

Assignment #3: Write a scene utilizing plant and payoff (5%)

"Preparation For a Date" assignment. Two short non-dialogue scenes. (script format) Deliver both by 10AM the day before class.

Designed to build audience engagement and expectation. Introduces the use of props, costume, and character-revealing activity -- but not necessarily dramatic action. Helps the writer practice time ellipsis, the technique of planting and payoff, and/or repetition with a variation. And, of course, preparation and aftermath. In two parts. Length: No more than a page total. (First scene = 1/2 page) of "preparation", second scene (1/3 page) of "aftermath".

In detail: Pick an interesting character and place him or her in a location significant to that character. (A home, an office, a combat bunker.) 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. Then, ellipse time and show the character's return. We do not see the primary scene of 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.

Week 4: Workshop scenes of Plant and Payoff / Finding conflict through your location/More Screenplay structure conversations.

HW: Write a CHARACTER INTRODUCTION SCENE (5%)

Reading: Character introductions from 3 or more screenplays (provided)

Research: Listen in on at least two (2) conversations during the next week.

Take notes of each person's use of diction and point of view in the situation.

Week 5: Workshop Character Introduction Scene / Creating unique dialog with authenticity.

Talk about your conversations - then

*PITCH YOUR FEATURE IDEAS - Try to come in with at least two possibilities.

I want a sentence or a paragraph about it. not the story, simply 'what's it about?' We will hive-mind and respond kindly to these ideas.

HW: Write a scene with authentic dialog (5%)

Week 6: Workshop Dialog Scene / Authentic characters

Reading/breakdown: "Beasts of the Southern Wild:

Assignment #6:

Rewrite a scene from the tools learned over the last several weeks (5%)

Choose a character from your scene work (or feature) and write a 2-page bio of that character (ungraded)

Begin macro STRUCTURE BEATS on your feature

Week 7: Workshop Rewritten Scenes / Character Development Review of Character Bio / present structure beats

Assignment: ACT1 beats

Week 8: Review of Character Bio / Discussion of Worldbuilding from Character/Act 1 beats

Reading: The Tools of Screenwriting – Basic Storytelling, pg. 19-40

Assignments:

1) Write a paragraph bio of two important people in that main characters life. Be specific of the role they play in that character's life and points of conflict.

2) ACT2 pt1 beats

Character Bio Packet Due by Next Class (15%)

Week 9: Building your Story from Character / Outline

HW: Please watch assigned films (2) from instructor & Start Outline
ACT2 pt2 beats

Week 10: Workshop of Outline of Feature Film / The Importance of Genre
Reading: The Tools of Screenwriting – Analysis, pg 114-274

HW: ACT3 beats

Week 11: Workshop of Outline of Feature Film / Tension

HW: 1) ENTIRE Outline Due (15%)

2) Write first 5 pages of Act One (send to both instructor & class)
Reading: The Tools of Screenwriting – Screenwriting Tools, pg 41-95

Note: Workshop will be divided into two groups. Please continue to turn in your assigned pages by the deadline. Folks who need additional time on their outline will be in Group B.

Week 12: Workshop of Feature First Act

Group A: Workshop first 5 pages

Group B: Keep writing (Individual Notes from Instructor)

Assignment: Write the 10 next pages of Act One

Week 13: Workshop

Group A: Keep writing (Individual Notes from Instructor)

Group B: Workshop of first 15 pages of Act One

Assignment: Write next 10 pages or til end.

Week 14: Workshop

Group A: Workshop of 25 pages of Act One (or til end)

Group B: Keep Writing (Individual Notes from Instructor)

Week 15: Individual Meetings with Students to Discuss Act One

Finals Week: Act One of Feature Script Due (30%)

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.

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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.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

ombuds.usc.edu

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

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