

Instructor: **Joshua Senter**
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Section: **#19432R**

Class meets: **Thursday, 10am - 12:50pm**
Location: **SCB 101**
Office hours: **By appointment**

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- To learn the principles and elements of writing a feature length screenplay.
- To develop an original feature length screenplay idea into a story with strong dramatic tension and characters that you are passionate about.
- To write a THREE ACT scene-by-scene OUTLINE of your feature length screenplay idea as well as workshop up to THREE SCENES from that story written as SCRIPT PAGES.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This is an introductory course in developing a feature-length screenplay in which you will discover 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 great cinematic tales.

The course will lead you through three fundamental aspects of storytelling: how to get started, stimulating inspiration for your work; how to acquire resources for discovering new characters, new worlds and fresh ideas; and techniques for developing (“breaking”) your stories into a detailed OUTLINE.

To this end, you will be given weekly assignments that you will either write in class or prepare outside class as homework. While you are expected to write these assignments and deliver them to me in printed form, you will generally be asked not to read what you’ve written, but to tell your stories in class. The idea is to develop your skills at verbally holding an audience’s attention.

You will focus on a single feature idea, presenting it as a short (3-5 page) treatment, then create an outline before pushing forward into writing actual script pages. The give-and-take of classroom discussion is a substantial aspect of the course. You are expected to participate and engage in the development of the stories of the other members of the class. Be as constructive, supportive, and enthusiastic as you can be.

For many of you, this semester will be your first foray into writing a ORIGINAL FEATURE LENGTH SCREENPLAY. So, we’ll start at the beginning of that process by creating an OUTLINE for a screenplay in which you’ll create three dimensional characters

and a compelling story in a THREE ACT structure. We will also work on a FEW SCRIPT PAGES to help with the development of the story.

As legions of writers have noted, story *is* character. If you create living, breathing, complex characters, they help you to generate the story and make it more unpredictable. So we will start off with the creation and development of our characters, making sure we know who they are and what they want.

We'll work on premise, story structure, scene structure, and conflict as you write the OUTLINE and then move into writing script pages as needed.

Our weekly class sessions will include lectures on elements of screenwriting, reading and discussion of students' work, and viewing of film clips. The schedule and assignments may be adjusted to help us accomplish what we want to do more effectively. There will also be individual conferences addressed to the needs of each student and his or her material.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

- 1. Attendance is mandatory. Unexcused absences will result in your grade being lowered. Students will read each other's work and provide constructive, considered feedback to their fellow writers. Energetic, positive, courteous participation in class is an invaluable part of the course (and it's fun).**

Here is the official Writing Division Attendance Policy:

Students are expected be on time and prepared for each class. Two unexcused absences will result in your grade being lowered by one full point (ex: A to B). A third unexcused absence will result in your grade being lowered another full point (ex: B to C). Two late arrivals equates to one full absence. In order for an absence to be excused the student must have approval from the professor and provide documentation at the next attended class session. 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 must miss class please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

- 2. Assignments are to be completed and submitted by specified due dates as discussed in class. Consistently late work will cost you a grade.**

- 3. Your assignments will be read and discussed in class so be sure to bring enough copies for every two students and the instructor. Free photocopying is available in the Writing Division office for class assignments under 10 pages.**

Please do not use the excuse of computers crashing, printers breaking, and other mechanical failures as reasons for not completing your assignments. Back up to flash drives, whatever, and print out often for your own safety and peace of mind.

SCRIPT FORMAT:

HAVE SCREENWRITING SOFTWARE. You will be required to write in standard script format (use a screenwriting program like Movie Magic, Final Draft, etc.).

Good writing is rewriting, and it's also proofreading. Make sure to correct all typos, dropped words, bad grammar, and misspellings.

REQUIRED READING:

3 FEATURE SCREENPLAYS, to be assigned

GRADING CRITERIA:

- Classroom participation - 10%**
- Character bios and premise - 20%**
- First draft of three act outline - 40%**
- Final polish of outline - 30%**

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

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

Outstanding work will get an A. Good work will get a B. Ordinary, average work will get a C. And so on.

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.

SEMESTER SCHEDULE:

WEEK 1 (August 24)

Introductions. Review of syllabus. Go over course goals and student expectations.
Topics: Discovering your story; elements of character, world, and theme.

Assignment: Come up with three pitches(ideas) for a possible feature film story.

WEEK 2 (August 31)

Each student will pitch their three ideas to the class, and we will all discuss. Topics: Importance of main character, goals, and obstacles.

Assignment: Pick the feature film story you are going to tell. Write CHARACTER BIOS, including leads' & secondary characters' wants and goals.

WEEK 3 (September 7)

Discuss and critique CHARACTER BIOS, and discuss the emerging shape of your STORY.
Topics: How story grows from character; the dramatic "pyramid."

Assignment: Write a three page STORY DOCUMENT. Focus on nailing the beginning, middle, and end of the story.

WEEK 4 (September 14)

Discuss and critique each student's three page STORY DOCUMENT. Topics: Basic structure; main tension, culmination, resolution, sequences.

Assignment: Complete the first half of ACT ONE of your OUTLINE.

WEEK 5 (September 21)

Discuss ACT ONE and story structure. Each student will present their ACT ONE progress. View film clip. Topics: Midpoints and Act Breaks.

Assignment: Finish ACT ONE of your OUTLINE; begin ACT TWO of your OUTLINE. Bring in a brief description of opening and closing scenes of ACT TWO.

WEEK 6 (September 28)

Present/discuss openings and closings of ACT TWO. Topics: Setups and payoffs (e.g. costume, props, dialogue); activity and action within scenes

Assignment: Complete ACT TWO of your OUTLINE; bring in description of opening & closing scenes of ACT THREE.

WEEK 7 (October 5)

Present/discuss ACT THREE openings and endings. Topics: Subplots and complications, often developed through Secondary Characters.

Assignment: Write the first half of your ACT THREE OUTLINE; create a CAST LIST.

WEEK 8 (October 12)

Discuss CAST LIST and secondary character subplots. Topics: Dramatic irony; Worthy Rivals.

Assignment: Complete first draft of your OUTLINE.

FALL BREAK (October 19)

WEEK 9 (October 26)

Discuss OUTLINE first drafts. Topics: Dialogue & Subtext. Dialogue vs. Behavior.

Assignment: Write OPENING SCENE of your screenplay as script pages.

WEEK 10 (November 2)

Read and workshop OPENING SCENES. Topics: The importance of choice & originality in location & environment.

Assignment: Rewrite ACT ONE of your OUTLINE. Write pivotal ACT TWO SCENE as script pages.

WEEK 11 (November 9)

Discuss ACT ONE of OUTLINE rewrites. Workshop pivotal ACT TWO SCENES. Topics: Verbal setups; economy and clarity of language. View film clips.

Assignment: Rewrite first half of ACT TWO of your OUTLINE. Write pivotal ACT THREE SCENE as script pages.

WEEK 12 (November 16)

Discuss OUTLINE rewrites. Workshop pivotal ACT THREE SCENES. Topic: Maintaining dramatic tension within scenes and throughout the story.

Assignment: Rewrite second half of ACT TWO of your OUTLINE.

THANKSGIVING BREAK

WEEK 13 (November 30)

Discuss OUTLINE rewrites. Workshop any remaining script scenes. Topics: Time frame of story building to a climax; Theme.

Assignment: Rewrite ACT THREE of your OUTLINE.

WEEK 14 (December 14)

FINAL: Turn in rewritten and polished OUTLINE.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Integrity:

The University of Southern California is a learning community committed to developing successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the dissemination of ideas. Academic misconduct, which includes any act of dishonesty in the production or submission of academic work, compromises the integrity of the person who commits the act and can impugn the perceived integrity of the entire university community. It stands in opposition to the university's mission to research, educate, and contribute productively to our community and the world.

All students are expected to submit assignments that represent their own original work, and that have been prepared specifically for the course or section for which they have been submitted. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s).

Other violations of academic integrity include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), collusion, knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university. All incidences of academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see [the student handbook](#) or the [Office of Academic Integrity's website](#), and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment, or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

Students and Disability Accommodations:

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. [The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Support Systems:

[*Counseling and Mental Health*](#) - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

[*988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline*](#) - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

[*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services \(RSVP\)*](#) - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

[*Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX \(EEO-TIX\)*](#) - (213) 740-5086

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

[*Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment*](#) - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

[The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) - (213) 740-0776

OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

[USC Campus Support and Intervention](#) - (213) 740-0411

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#) - (213) 740-2101

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

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) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call

Non-emergency assistance or information.

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

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.

[Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice](#) - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.

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.

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**