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

CTWR 409: "Fundamentals of Screenwriting: Character, Conflict, & Story"
Spring 2024 – 4 units

Instructor: Jody Wheeler
Class Schedule: Monday 1-3:50pm
Class Location: SCA 363
Office Hours: By appointment
Contact Information: josephw9@usc.edu

Course Objective:
To learn the professional approach of writing relatable characters, in conflict driven scenes, with an authentic voice. In addition, students will learn the 3-act structure and how to create a compelling world. The culmination in this class will be the first act and treatment of a feature script.

Course Description:
As an introductory course for non-majors, "Fundamentals of Screenwriting" is a foundational course that focuses on the craft of storytelling. The focus will be on discovering your creative voice, the mechanics of scene work, creating compelling character arcs, and understanding the 3-act structure of feature films.

Through scene work, character work, and story development students will learn the tools of crafting professional scenes. The culmination of this course will be a first act of a feature script of 25-30 pages and a 10 page treatment outlining the entire film.

Course Reading / Media:
Book:
The Tools of Screenwriting by David Howard and Edward Mabley
The Hollywood Standard - Third Edition: The Complete and Authoritative Guide to Script Format and Style
The Art of Dramatic Writing by Lajos Egri

Optional:
39 Steps To Better Screenwriting by Paul Chitlik

Screenplays:
The Dark Place by Jody Wheeler

Others as assigned.

Movies:
Breathing (Atmen) (2011)
https://www.kanopy.com/product/breathing-atmen

The Dark Place (2014)
https://www.amazon.com/Dark-Place-Blaise-Embry/dp/B00PFL8YEI

Others as assigned.

Grading Criteria:
Assignments: 50%
     #1: Spine - 10
     #2: Beat Sheet -10
     #3 Treatment (Draft) - 10
     #4. First 10 pages of your script - 10
     #5: First Act (draft) - 10
Polished First Act &Treatment: 30%
Participation: 20%

Your grade will be based upon fulfillment of the weekly assignments, the quality of your final screenplay, and your participation in class.

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 assignment prior to submission.

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 or workshops without the consent of the instructor.

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:
Latops may be used for the purpose of taking notes during workshop. Cell phones should not be used in the classroom.

BLOGGING, PODCASTING, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND RECORDING:
Our class lectures and discussions are considered private communications. Not only will we all be sharing personal stories, but we'll be sharing intellectual property. Therefore, if you have a blog, or podcast, or post about your personal life on social media, anything covered in this class, including lecture material, is considered off limits when it comes to posting on your blog or social media accounts and when it comes to your podcast. And you are not permitted to record lectures or workshop sessions or any of our discussions.

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:
Students are expected be on time, prepared for each class, and meet professional standards.

Students are **allowed two absences** throughout the semester.

On the third absence, students will have their final grade lowered by 10% and an additional 10% for each absence thereafter. Two late arrivals equates to one full absence.

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.

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.

COVID: Please follow all USC COVID Policies. If you suspect you are sick, do not come to class.

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

Week 1 (1/8): Who Are You?
Introductions
How to think about movies
      What is this film about?
      Who is this film about?
      What does everyone want?
      What's stopping them from getting what they want?
      How do they change at the end?
In class writing exercise

For Next Week:
• Read "The Dark Place Script"
• Read Tools, pg 1-22
• Bring in two story ideas for next week

Week 2 (1/15)
No Class / MLK Day

Week 3 (1/22): What's In A Scene
Parts of a Scene
• Description
• Action
• Dialogue
• Exposition
• Only what you see and hear
• No thinking
• Come in late and leave Early
• What is the subject and purpose of the scene?
Discussion of "The Dark Place" Script
Share story ideas.

For Next Week:
Watch: The Dark Place
Read: Character Bios From The Dark Place (Blackboard)
Read: Read Dramatic Writing pg 1-31
Create: Premise for your story

Week 4 (1/29): Characters And Conflict
Understanding Premise
Protagonists and Antagonists
How characters suit the premise
How conflict reveals characters
How story emerges out of characters in conflict
Analyzing Characters and Conflict in Scene From TDP
Biographies / Character Sketch
Compare Scenes / Script vs. Film of "The Dark Place"

For Next Week:
Watch: Watch Atmen (2011)
Read: A screenplay
Read Tools, 23-40
Read Dramatic Writing, pg 32-59
Create: Write a biography / sketch of your protagonist and antagonist

Week 5 (2/5): Supporting Character & Dialogue
Discuss Atmen

Read Character Bios / Sketches
• Are these characters interesting?
• Do we want to spend time with them?
• Will these characters tell your story and prove your premise?
• Are all of your characters plausible within the genre you've chosen?

Supporting Characters
• What makes a memorable supporting character
• How does each character *support* the main character?

Dialogue
• What is good dialogue?
• How do you get it?
• Subtext – its uses and abuses.
• Visual storytelling versus dialogue.
• What kind of dialogue to avoid.

Listening to Life
• How this informs writing dialogue

For Next Week:
Read: Dramatic Writing 59-86
          Tools 41-58
Create: -Listen in on people talking.
          - Create a "Scene" from what you hear.
          -Create a biography / sketch of one supporting character

Week 6: 2/12 Story
Read "Listening In" scenes
• What did you learn from listening to conversation
• What did you learn about writing a conversation?

Story
• What is a story?
• Where are you going?
• What gives a story a beginning, a middle, and an end?
• What is a character arc?

- What is a scene?
- Why do we need conflict?
- Act Structure
- Spine

For Next Week:
Read: Dramatic Writing 59-86 i
Read: Tools 41-58
Assignment #1: Write 7 point spine

Week 7 (2/19): Structure
Read and discuss your spines
Structure
- Inciting Incidents
- Beat Sheets
- What you must know about every character at the beginning of each scene.
- What is the subject and purpose of the scene?
- What kinds of scenes and how many do you need for your screenplay?
- How to write a beat sheet.
- Examples of points from popular films

For Next Week:
Read: The Art of Dramatic Writing by Lajos Egri, pages 86-125.
Read: Tools, 58-78
Assignment #2: Write the beat sheet for the First Act
For next week: Read a script

Week 8 (2/26): Spines and Steps
Discuss script you read
Read your spines
1.   The turning point
3.   Making the action plausible.
4.   Making the "world" consistent.
5.   Creating surprise yet still making sense (especially at turning point). Do we care what happens?
Focus on First Act
Fleshing Out First Act

For Next Week:
Read: The Dark Place Treatment

Create: Revise First Act beat sheet and write Act Two and Act Three beat sheets

Week 9 (3/4): Treatments
Share second half of beat sheet
- Obstacles and twists.
- Emotions
- Maintaining conflict, building subplots, set-ups and pay-offs.
- Examining your story for time.

Treatments
       Prose version of story.
       Contains bits of dialogue
       Create and payoff set-ups
How to go from your beat sheet to a treatment for your script

For Next Week
Read: Remainder of Art of Dramatic Writing
Assignment #3: Write a 5- page treatment of your whole film

Week 10 (3/11): The First 10 (to 12….)
Read treatments
How to go from your treatment to the (First Act) of your script
The First 10 Pages
       Writing the Normal World
       Writing the Inciting Incident

For Next Week
Assignment #4: Write First 10-12 Pages

Week 11 (3/18): Reading the First 10 Pages pt1
Read the First 10 pages pt 1
       Upload to Blackboard
       Be sure you know how many characters are in your pages.

For Next Week
Create: Revise First 10 Pages

Week 12 (3/25): Reading the First 10 pt2 / First Act Choice
Read First 10 Pages pt 2 (Other half of class)
First Act Choice
The Rest of the Act

For Next Week
Assignment #5: Write Rest of the Act

Week 13 (4/1): First Acts pt 1
Read First Acts pt 1
       Upload to Blackboard
       Be sure you know how many characters are in your pages.

How To Revise
    1. Read for story
    2. Read for conflict
    3. Read for character
    4. Read for supporting characters' stories
    5. Mercedes pass

For Next Week:
Read: 39 Steps to Better Screenwriting
Revise First Act

Week 14 (4/8): First Act pt 2 / Revising / Rest of the Script
Read First Acts pt 2 (other half of class)

Act Two and Act Three
1. Ending the film?
2. Is it necessary to wrap up neatly?
3. Is it necessary to have the 7 points?

For Next Week
Revise First Act

Week 15 (4/15):
Read Revised First Acts pt1
Discussion Production Realities

For Next Week
Assignment: Start to polish First Act

Week 16 (4/22):
Read Revised First Acts pt2

DUE FRIDAY Friday, April 26th
Polished First Act And Treatment

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) l 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.

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-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