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: Valerie Mayhew
Class Day/Time: Friday, 10:00 am – 12:50 pm
Class Location: SCA 342
Office Hours: By email appointment for in-person or Zoom
Contact Information: vmayhew@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 a feature film outline and the first act of the script.

Course Description:

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

Through scene study, character work, and story development students will learn the tools of crafting professional material for the screen. The culmination of the course will be the first act of a feature screenplay (25-30 pages).

Course Reading:

Book: "The Tools of Screenwriting" by David Howard and Edward Mabley

Screenplays: TBD by instructor and student needs

Recommended Software

Final Draft – the industry standard screenwriting software
A student price is available at store.finaldraft.com/final-draft-12-edu.html
Free trials are also offered at their website: trial.finaldraft.com

Other acceptable free software: WriterDuet www.writerduet.com, Celtx www.celtx.com

Grading Criteria:

Students MUST distribute their work via email by 12pm on Thursdays in pdf to all fellow screenwriters in the class.

Scenes, Bios & Outline Grading Rubric:

> On time: 25%
> Realization of theme/assignment: 25%
> Formatting: 25%
> Quality/effectiveness: 25%

Final Project (First Act of Feature) Grading Rubric:

> Story: 30%
> Formatting: 30%
> Character: 20%
> Dialogue: 20%

Total Class Grade:

> Participation: 10%
> Scene: Atmosphere 5%
> Scene: Conflict 5%
> Scene: Planting & Payoff 5%
> Scene: Character 5%
> Scene: Dialog 5%
> Scene: Rewrite 5%
> Character Bios: 15%
> Outline: 15%
> First Act: 30%
> ----------------------------------
> Total   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%

NOTE: If you are Writing for Screen and Television major or minor, you must receive a grade of C or better to receive degree credit.

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.

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.

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.

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.

<u>Recording Devices</u>:

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

<u>Laptop and Cell Phone Policy</u>:

Laptops may be used for the purpose of <u>taking notes</u> during the workshop. Cell phones should not be used in the classroom.

<u>Class Schedule</u>:

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

Week 1   January 12th

Class Time: Introduction to the Course
Formatting is your Friend
Critique vs. Criticism or How to Avoid Fist Fights
Mary Poppins was Right: Well Begun is Half Done
Introducing Character - Screenings: tentative "Get Shorty", "Little Miss Sunshine", "Hidden Figures"
Introducing Character – Reading: "Hidden Figures"
Setting Atmosphere – Screenings and Reading: TBA
Assignment Given: Writing Assignment #1 – Atmosphere
Write 3 short description paragraphs, without dialogue, focusing on Atmosphere: a) Horror, b) Romance, and c) Comedy.

Week 2   January 19th

Assignment Due: Writing Assignment # 1
Class Time: Reading and notes on Writing Assignment #1
The Magic Equation: Hero + Objective + Obstacle = CONFLICT!
Creating Conflict – Screenings: TBA
Creating Conflict – Reading: tentatively "Moonlight"
Assignment Given: Writing Assignment #2 – Conflict
Write a 3-5 page scene of direct conflict between two characters.

Week 3   January 26th

Assignment Due: Writing Assignment #2
Class Time: Reading and notes on Writing Assignment #2
The Satisfying Dance – Planting and Payoff

> Planting and Payoff Screening & Reading: "Barbie"
> **Assignment Given:** Writing Assignment #3 – Planting and Payoff
>   Write 2 scenes: the first with the Planting and the second with the
>   Payoff.

Week 4   *February 2nd*

> **Assignment Due:** Writing Assignment #3
> **Class Time:** Reading and notes on Writing Assignment #3
>   The Clash of Titans – Character and Location
>   Character and Location Screening and Reading: TBA
> **Assignment Given:** Writing Assignment #4 – A Challenging Environment
>   Write a 3-5 page scene focusing on a character introduction that
>   involves them entering a difficult/dangerous/challenging
>   environment.
> **Research Given:** Listen in on at least two conversations during the next week.
>   Take notes of each person's use of jargon, slang, diction,
>   vocabulary, accent, and point of view.

Week 5   *February 9th*

> **Assignments Due**: Writing Assignment #4
>   Research on Dialogue
> **Class Time**: Reading and notes on Writing Assignment #4
>   Reporting on Eavesdropping Fun
>   The Multipurpose Tool of Screenwriting: Dialogue
>   Dialogue Screenings and Reading: TBA
> **Assignment Given**: Writing Assignment #5 – Authentic Dialogue
>   Write a 3-5 page scene with dialogue that feels authentic, reveals
>   character, and moves the story forward.

Week 6   *February 16th*

> **Assignment Due**: Writing Assignment #5
> **Class Time**: Reading and notes on Writing Assignment #5
>   3-Act Feature Film Structure – From Aristotle to Sid Field, With a
>   Wave at Joseph Campbell
>   3-Act Structure Reading: tentatively "Star Wars"
> **Assignment Given**: Writing Assignment #6 – Rewriting Is My Life
>   Rewrite one of your previous scenes using what you've learned and
>   with an eye toward your final script.

Week 7   *February 23rd*

> **Assignment Due**: Writing Assignment #6
> **Class Time**: Reading and Notes on Writing Assignment #6
>   Character Arcs – Change is Good for the Soul (and Structure)
> **Assignment Given**: Writing Assignment #7 – Protagonist Bio, Rough Draft
>   Choose a character you would like to write a feature film script about

and write a 2-page biography. It can be a character used in previous scene work or a new character entirely.

Week 8   March 1ˢᵗ

Assignment Due: Writing Assignment #7
Class Time: Reading and notes on Writing Assignment #7
        Back to the Magic Formula, Part 2
Assignment Given: Writing Assignment #8 – Sidekicks and Love Interests
        Write a one-page bio of two important people in your main character's life. Be specific about their influence on the protagonist and points of conflict. Additionally, revise your Protagonist Bio, based on feedback.
Reading Assigned: "The Tools of Screenwriting" pages 19 – 40

Week 9   March 8ᵗʰ

Assignment Due: Three Biographies
Class Time: Reading and notes on Biographies
        OMG or How I Stopped Worrying and Came to Love Development
Assignment Given: The Synopsis
        Write a one-page, three-act synopsis of your feature film story.
Research Given: Watch an assigned film chosen specifically for you.

Week 10   Spring Break!

Week 11   March 22ⁿᵈ

Assignment Due: The Synopsis
Class Time: Reading and notes on Synopses
        Elaboration of conflict, subplots and structuring the big dramatic beats
Reading Assigned: "The Tools of Screenwriting" pages 114 – 274
Assignment Given: The Outline
        No panicking. Just take it bird by bird (h/t Anne Lamott)

Week 12   March 29ᵗʰ

Assignment Due: The Outline
Class Time: Reading and notes on Outlines
Assignment Given: Revising the Outline

Week 13   April 5ᵗʰ

Assignment Due: Revised Outlines
Class Time: Reading Revised Outlines
Assignment Given: Write the first 5 pages of Act One
Reading Assigned: "The Tools of Screenwriting" pages 41-95

IMPORTANT: At this point the class will be divided into two groups, A and B. Screenwriters who need additional time on their outlines will be in Group B.

Week 14   April 12th

> **Class Time**: Reading and notes on First 5 Pages
> **Assignment Given**:
> > Group A – Continue writing next 10 pages
> > Group B – Receive notes from Instructor and continue.

Week 15   April 19th

> **Class Time**: Reading and notes on First Act pages with your Group
> **Assignment Given:**
> > Group A – Continue writing until end of Act One
> > Group B – Should get to at least page 15 of Act One
> **Reading Assigned**: Read each other's delivered pages and be prepared to give
> > feedback.

Week 16   April 26th

> **Class Time**: Receive notes from your group members.

Final Due May 3rd (?)

> **Act One of Feature Script**

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems Academic Conduct

<u>Academic Conduct</u>

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.

<u>Support Systems</u>

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 Student Accessibility Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776
osas.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-maildiversity@cinema.usc.edu. You can also report discrimination based on a protected class herehttps://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.