
USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS

CTWR 413: Writing the Short Script 1
SPRING 2024 SYLLABUS (2 Units)

Instructor: Bonnie Garvin
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Section: # 19182

Class meets: Wednesday 10:00 -1:00 PM
Location: SCA 342
Office hours: By Appointment

GOALS OF THIS COURSE:

- Introduction to the craft of screenwriting.
- To learn and practice the elements of a “Simple story well told.”
- To strengthen & deepen your ability to conceive compelling ideas, characters and stories through experience and observation
- To learn to write from a visual and aural perspective.
- To learn narrative structure
- To learn the building blocks of the dramatic scene.
- To write a short script screenplay

This is an introductory class in writing for the screen in which you will learn and develop your craft as a storyteller, drawing on your memories, experiences, observation, and of course imagination to create compelling characters and tales.

Together we will read and critique a series of weekly assignments, both in and outside the class, designed to help you understand the fundamentals of screenwriting. You will learn to bring your visual and aural senses to your writing, to see and hear your film as you write it, developing and exploring your characters through situations of conflict.

At the end of the class you will apply your skills to writing a short narrative 5-6 *page CTPR 310 script*.

ASSIGNMENTS & SCHEDULE

WEEK ONE – Intro to Dramatic Storytelling

In Class: Introduction of the course and overarching objectives.

In Class Assignment: TRIP TO SCHOOL

Tell us about a real event that happened to you on your way to school or on your way home from school. It could be any school and any age.

Discuss: Is this a story? What elements would make it a story or a better story.

Discuss other sources of story ideas beyond your personal memories.

Assignment for Next Week: Read a professional screenplay or TV pilot assigned by your instructor. Be prepared to discuss: Who is the main character? What do they actively want in the story? Who (or what) is the primary source of opposition to their goal?

Assignment for Next Week: Describe one of the following memories in prose:

- Your favorite toy as a child.
- A secret place you used to go.
- The most frightening person from your childhood.

What do you remember seeing and hearing? What emotions do you recall? How would you build a story around this memory?

WEEK TWO – INTRO TO SCREENWRITING TECHNIQUE

In Class: How Scripts Work. Learn Professional Screenplay format and how to use style techniques to express your personal voice. What are the elements used in screenwriting?

Discuss: The style choices made in the screenplay you've read. What are your favorite line(s) of description and why?

Discuss: Memory essay(s). Note the importance of props, characters, locations. What kind of character relationships and conflicts emerged?

Assignment for Next Week: "Preparation for a Date" exercise, written as a mini one to two-page screenplay with correct formatting. (see **Appendix**)

WEEK THREE – WHAT MAKES A GOOD STORY: Characters Moving Through Conflict and Obstacles: Intro to Story Structure

In Class: How to create three-dimensional characters that that pursue goals and face conflict as they move through your story. The Character Rubric: Beyond Want and Need. Arcs and Arc Symmetry.

What makes effective dialogue and how to develop an ‘ear’ for dialogue.

Discuss: Review/critique “Preparation for a Date.”

Assignment for Next Week: “The Worst Person in the World” 3-4 page screenplay with emphasis on dialogue techniques, tension building, “moment of apparent defeat.” (see **Appendix**)

WEEK FOUR – ADVANCED STORY TECHNIQUES

In Class: A deeper dive into story

And: How Short Films work: How a Short is the same as - and different from - a Feature.

Screening: Instructors may screen one or several short films.

Discuss: Review/critique “The Worst Person in the World”

Assignment for Next Week: “Seduction/Persuasion” exercise, a 3-4 page screenplay exercise, or other screenplay assignment at instructor's' discretion. (see **Appendix**)

WEEK FIVE – HOW REALISM WORKS

In Class: Assign “New Worlds” (see below) and discuss what make a story “realistic” and the different types of realism. What makes a story seem authentic?

To Discuss: Review/critique “Seduction/Persuasion” or other Week 6 Assignment

In Class Exercise: “True/False” (see **Appendix**)

Assignment for Next Week: “New Worlds” (see **Appendix**)

WEEK SIX – HOW REALISM WORKS, Part 2

Discuss: Review/critique “Research Project.” Discuss issues and challenges and each student’s research methods. What worked and what didn’t?

Assignment for Next Week: Prepare 3-4 Loglines and Central Questions for at least three 310 ideas*

NB: This is the only assignment after Week 2 due in class (not in advance) and read aloud in class since student feedback and active discussions can spark new ideas.

WEEK SEVEN – TOPIC TBD

In Class: Instructor discretion.

To Discuss: Discuss loglines in a class roundtable. Expand on or edit ideas.

Assignment for Next Week: Revise loglines.

WEEK EIGHT – HOW OUTLINING WORKS PLUS 310 LOGLINES

In Class: How Outlining works: How and why to write a Treatment and Outline.

To Discuss: Listen to and discuss 310 “pitches” (loglines) with 310 Faculty.

****310 Instructors Visit Classes****

Assignment for Next Week: Treatment/Outline hybrid (treatment with act breaks and midpoint) for one (two max if absolutely essential) 310 stories.

WEEK NINE -- HOW TO WRITE A BEATSHEET: THE 310 BEATSHEET

In Class: What exactly is “A Beat” (how a story beat is different from directing/editing beats) and How to Write a Beatsheet.

To Discuss: Critique and Feedback for 310 Treatment/Outlines.

Assignment for Next Week: 310 Beatsheets for the one chosen 310.

WEEK TEN – BEATSHEET FEEDBACK

In Class: Instructor discretion.

To Discuss: Critique and Feedback for 310 Beatsheets

Assignment for Next Week: Write the 310 First Draft (Group A and B)

****At this point in the semester, Instructors may want to A/B the class so that only 6 scripts are being written, covered for notes, and discussed each week.****

(this can also begin the previous week (9) so that the Beatsheets are done over two classes as well)

WEEK ELEVEN – TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES OF THE REWRITE

In Class: How Rewriting works: Tools and Techniques of the Rewrite

Also: How to use Revision Mode in Final Drafts and other programs.

To Discuss: Critique and Feedback for 310 First Drafts (Group A)

Assignment for Next Week: Rewrite: the 310 Second Draft (Group A)

WEEK TWELVE – MODULAR LECTURE PLUS CRITIQUE

In Class: Writing Habits and Workflow Habits and Hacks (or Instructor discretion.)

To Discuss: Critique and Feedback for 310 First Drafts (Group B)

Assignment for Next Week: Rewrite: the 310 Second Draft (Group B)

WEEK THIRTEEN – CRITIQUE

In Class: Instructor Discretion

To Discuss: Critique and Feedback for 310 Second Drafts (Group A)

WEEK FOURTEEN – CRITIQUE

In Class: Instructor Discretion

To Discuss: Critique and Feedback for 310 Second Drafts (Group B)

Assignment for Next Week: All Students should be addressing final notes and preparing a final draft if applicable.

WEEK FIFTEEN – FINAL 310 CRITIQUES AND FINAL EXAM ASSIGNMENTS

In Class: Instructor Discretion

To Discuss: Critique and Feedback for any 310 ‘Final’ Drafts

Assignment for “Final Exam”: Final Polishes and “Final Critique Project” (see **Appendix**) (optional, at Instructor Discretion)

READING:

You should read as many screenplays as possible to familiarize yourself with the styles and form of other professional writers. You will be assigned some scripts to read on your own time and be prepared to discuss them in class. Additionally the following books are highly suggested:

Bird by Bird, Ann LaMott

The Tools of Screenwriting by Howard & Mabley

Your Screenplay Sucks, by William Akers

GRADING:

Weekly writing Assignments: 50%

Reading and Responding to Workshop Assignments, incl. Class Participation: 20%

Final 310 Scrip: 30%

Class participation includes full involvement in and contribution to all class discussions, as well as reading (in advance at times; see schedule above) the assignments of the other students and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.

Class attendance is mandatory, and includes being on time to class (otherwise, the students who present their material first are short-changed).

You are allowed one unexcused absence (documentation required for excused absences). Beyond one, you will receive a reduction of one-third letter grade for each unexcused absence. (e.g., A- down to B+, B down to B-)

Tardiness is unprofessional, and unacceptable. You will be allowed no more than one unexcused tardiness. Further tardiness will result in one-sixth letter grade for each occurrence. (e.g., A- down to B+, B down to B-)

Late assignments will result in a lower grade.

All work must be delivered in proper format and emailed to the instructor and all classmates by 5 pm on the day before class.

Per the 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%

A : Work of **excellent** quality. Outstanding application of the dramatic principles and fulfillment of course requirements and deadlines as specified in the syllabus.

B : Work of **good** quality. Above average fulfillments of course requirements and deadlines.

C : Work of **fair** quality. Minimum fulfillment of course requirements and deadlines for passing graduate credit.

C- : **FAIL to meet minimum grade for credit. NON PASSING GRAD**

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

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

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reading (in advance at times; 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.

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” <https://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, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Support Systems:

Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>

Sexual Assault Resource Center

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: <http://sarc.usc.edu/>

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://equity.usc.edu/>

Bias Assessment Response and Support

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Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>

The Office of Disability Services and Programs

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. <http://dsp.usc.edu>

Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>

Diversity at USC

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. <https://diversity.usc.edu/>

USC Emergency Information

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, <http://emergency.usc.edu>

USC Department of Public Safety – 213-740-4321 (UPC) and 323-442-1000 (HSC) for 24-hour emergency assistance or to report a crime.

Provides overall safety to USC community. <http://dps.usc.edu>

APPENDIX - CLASS ASSIGNMENTS

“Preparation For A Date”

Length: No more than 2 pages total. The First scene, “preparation,” should be 65-70% of your pages. The Second scene, “aftermath.” should be 30-35% of your pages. (this is a helpful guideline, not a rule.)

Assignment: Pick a character and place them in a location significant to that character. (A home, an office, a combat bunker.) Use light, and sound to build mood and atmosphere and sense of place.

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.

Also: There should be no signs, texts, notes, no written/printed words. Use description to set the scene!

Then, ellipse time and show the character's return to the exact same location. We do not see 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.

This should be a story, or at least part of one, using the techniques you’ve just learned.

“The Worst Person in the World” aka “Wrongest [sic] Person”/“Intruder”/“Wrong Arrival”

Length: 3 - 4 pages

Assignment: This is a dialogue scene between two characters*.

The setup: Character A waits for Character B but Character C shows up first.

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Character C should be, from what we know of Character A and their plans, the absolute worst person who could arrive.

Character A must get rid of Character C before they cross paths with character B!

But, character A cannot come out and say exactly why character C must leave.

The audience must know what is being planned and the stakes involved. (But this cannot be conveyed via dialogue on the phone, answering machine, texted etc.)

Character C must be entirely motivated to stay.

The scene ends immediately when Character B arrives, whether Character A is successful in getting rid of character C, or not.

*You may have Character B speak a few words for humorous or dramatic effect, but they must be the last person to speak. **This is a two person scene.**

You may have non-speaking background characters for atmosphere purposes only. They cannot influence the scene in any way, and their presence cannot help or hinder any character's goals. (test: Would this scene be exactly the same without the background character(s) except for realism/accuracy of place?)

C's arrival should not be random, as in 'A prepares dinner for their mother but a robber shows up.' That's too easy. The idea is that C worst person given who B is.

Be sure to keep an eye on:

- 1) Character - They must be unique characters who want something.
- 2) Dialogue - Expressive, Character Revealing, Not overly literal, Distinct voices (rhythm, syntax, word choice, etc).
- 3) Story Structure - If your story ends on a good news beat, you should have a Moment of Apparent Defeat before the final success. If your story ends on a bad news beat, you should have a Moment of Apparent Success before the final defeat.

“True False”

Length: ½ to ¾ page each

Assignment: Write two prose stories, one totally true and the other totally false. Each story is read aloud* in class. The class will vote on which story they believe is true which is false. The “winning” student is the one with the most ‘true’ votes for their fake story.

*NB: To avoid students being able to use the ‘process of elimination’ to pick the true story, the instructor should collect all the stories, randomize them, and read them themselves.

“New Worlds” aka “The Research Project” aka “Professions”

Length: 2 to 4 pages

Assignment: Write a 2-4 page screenplay with two or more people who do/belong to a specific job/sport/hobby/social group you know nothing about.

You'll be graded on the realism of the job/hobby/world details and lifestyle that are expressed in *dialogue* and to a much lesser extent, description. (i.e. you can't just write a really good description of the things you see and call it a day. This is a DIALOGUE exercise!) It's about the lingo, nomenclature, values and rhythms of these characters.

Will we believe you know how two people in a submarine talk and about what? Or a dry cleaner? Or a dentist office? Or two darts champions? We must understand what's going on in the scene and why.

The priority is to write believable characters, not jam the story full of jargon.

No ‘CSI’-Style Dialogue where one character explains their job to someone doing the same job.

NB: Be extremely careful when including “outsiders” and/or neophytes. When an “expert” “talks to a “non-expert” (or an “insider” to an “outsider”) they - by the very nature of these roles - have to speak in a way that’s accessible and general. The assignment is to do the opposite of that.

“Seduction/Persuasion”

Length: 3 – 4 pages

Assignment: One character (“The Seducer”) wants another character (“The Mark”) to do something. The Seducer should know exactly what leverage to use, or should be able to figure it out. The reward should be appealing to the person being seduced, but that person should have legitimate, character-revealing opposition to doing it. The seduction/persuasion should escalate to the point where the reader legitimately can’t guess how it will end. The scene ends when The Mark agrees or doesn’t.

“Final Critique Project” (formerly “The Summary Project”)

Length: Total length, including critiques of all 12 scripts should not exceed 6 pages.

Assignment: Students should read each of the 508 final drafts and prepare a brief (approx. $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ page each) critique of each script (including their own), highlighting what works and what needs improvement and why. Does the story work? Are the characters compelling? etc.