



**USC School of Cinematic Arts**  
**The John Wells Division of Writing for Screen & Television**

**CTWR 514B Basic Dramatic Screenwriting**  
Section 19235D, 2.0 Units  
**Spring 2024**

**Class Schedule:** Tuesdays, 4:00 – 6:50 PM

**Location:** SCA 361

**Instructor:** Rob Edwards

**Office:** Via Calendly <https://calendly.com/rob-edwards-iv/office-hours-rob-edwards-usc-ctwr-514b>

**Office Hours:** Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays (check app for specific times.)

**Contact Info:** [robedwar@usc.edu](mailto:robedwar@usc.edu). Replies within 48 hours.

**Course Description:**

Students will develop two feature-length story ideas presented both orally and in written form. From those ideas we will choose one to develop into a sequence breakdown, then step outline and, finally, into a first draft feature screenplay.

**Course Goals:**

- Learn how to develop ideas into full-fledged screenplays.
- Create unique and dynamic characters with strong inner lives and complex problems and relationships.
- Establish a clear personal connection to drive and enliven the story.
- “See the Matrix” of narrative cinematic technique and structure.
- Acquire professional command of format, visual writing style, and dialogue.
- Develop robust skills in outlining and tracking a story’s dramatic through-line while continually driving toward the best presentation of your idea.
- Learn to give and take precise and constructive notes.
- Learn strategies to push through “blocks” and write with the wind at your back.

**Course Overview and Instructor Philosophy:**

When you have interesting and inspirational stories to tell, you have an obligation to share them with the world. Given that, all good art contains a balance of heart, head, and hand. The hand, is the craft that you put into your work and I will do my very best to teach you the craft as I understand it. The “head” are the new ideas you’ll bring to make your stories original and entertaining. The “heart” is what’s inside of you. The more heart you put into your work, the more it will resonate with and move your audience. In this class, we will endeavor to find (or refine) your unique voice as a

writer and filmmaker. Nothing will make me more satisfied than seeing you effectively tell the story you want to tell in the way you want to tell it.

The thorny word in that sentence is “effectively.” You may have built an amazing world in your head that you’ve populated with nuanced characters you know audiences will love forever. But if you can’t communicate that vision effectively—so it lives in the imaginations of others—it’s dead as soon as it hits the gatekeeper’s desk. It’s not enough to speak (or write) your unique and special voice, you need others to hear it through every word you put on the page.

So, in this class, you have two equally important roles:

One as **writer**, writing and revising your assignments each week, integrating all the skills you’re learning, daring to put a piece of yourself into each word, then distributing it to the class by the established deadlines.

And two, as **reader/listener**. Each week, when your classmates send out their pages, your job is to receive, digest, and offer constructive feedback. I’ve learned from some of the best note givers at Pixar and I’ll share what I learned at the Pixar Braintrust with you.

To get through your semesters, you’ll fight a myriad of elements on a daily basis. But, in this class, you’re working a different, opposite muscle—and your biggest fight will be inward—so it’s vital you leave your armor at the door.

There’s an art to giving constructive feedback. Ed Catmull, the former President of Pixar, said that movies are terrible until the very last minute. As surgeons of story, our job is to step into the mind of the writer to assess their intent, figure out why they were not able to achieve their objective and then pinpoint the changes they’ll need to make moving forward. If you’re trying to make a different movie, it’s not constructive. If you’re trying to fix something that’s not broken, it’s not constructive. If you’re solving a problem in a way that doesn’t make the movie better, it’s the definition of not constructive. So, yes, both the giver and the taker of the notes will learn from each interaction. Don’t worry if you’re not great on the first day, you’ll get there. But, we don’t get better at the things we don’t do. So be ready to give good notes in every class quickly and efficiently so that everybody can share in the fun.

Great writing is equal parts, math and psychology. I’m a strong advocate for “story math”, and you’ll find out how good structure makes your stories clearer and easier to read. The honesty and depth you bring to your material will require a mix of honesty and vulnerability. No one expects anyone to strike gold on the first day but you have to dig for it to find it. As a class, we’ll do our best to encourage this process and make it easy for each other.

Most importantly, this semester is about one thing. Finishing your screenplay. Make your deadlines. Push through it. Develop the mental muscles of a professional writer. It will get harder as we get deeper into the semester so mentally and physically prepare yourselves now. Keep a notebook to check in with yourself, build tools for the next time you write, schedule time for yourself, ask yourself the right questions, and most importantly, **USE THE OFFICE HOURS**. Office Hours are unlimited, so talk through your ideas and inspirations with me, and we’ll get you through it.

On the following page you’ll find the course schedule. I expect you to keep up with the very brisk pace of assigned writing your own pages and your notes on each other’s work. I won’t ask you to turn in your notes, but I have been known to look over shoulders. Write them, rehearse them, and give them clearly. Remember, time is limited, so it doesn’t help anyone if you vamp, improvise, and filibuster. Give notes in the way you want to receive them and the semester will be a lot more enjoyable. Remember, we’re all in this together. Enjoy the journey.

## Recommended Reading

The Tools of Screenwriting by David Howard and Edward Mabley.

## Recommended Viewing

Throughout the semester, I'll be referring to several films as examples of various elements of storytelling. Here is a list of the movies I've written as well as a few others that tend to come up frequently during development meetings. It will be easier to understand the concepts that come up in class if you're familiar with these movies and TV episodes.

***The Princess and the Frog*** (2009, screenplay by Ron Clements, John Musker and Rob Edwards)  
***Treasure Planet*** (2002, screenplay by Ron Clements, John Musker, and Rob Edwards)  
***Top Gun*** (1986, written by Jim Cash & Jack Epps Jr) \*  
***Star Wars (A New Hope)*** (1977, written by George Lucas) \*  
***Die Hard*** (1988, screenplay by Jeb Stewart and Steven E. de Souza) \*  
***"The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air"*** Episodes S1:E1, S1:E13, S1:E23

I've also included a few films that I tend to refer to less frequently. Feel free to watch them at your leisure.

***Raiders of the Lost Ark*** (1981, screenplay by Lawrence Kasdan, story by George Lucas and Philip Kaufman)  
***Tootsie*** (1982, screenplay by Larry Gelbart and Murray Schisgal)  
***Little Miss Sunshine*** (2006, written by Michael Arndt)  
***Jojo Rabbit*** (2019, written by Christine Leunens and Taika Waititi)  
***Booksmart*** (2019, written by Emily Halpern & Sarah Haskins and Susanna Fogel and Katie Silberman)

## Course Notes

All written assignments will be due by **11:59 PM on the Sundays preceding our Tuesday classes**. This is a firm deadline that will give you the most time to write while giving your classmates the most time to read and formulate notes. Your classmates and I are not obliged to read or offer comments on any work submitted after the deadline. It is by our discretion only. All assignments must be submitted to your Google Drive folder in PDF format. I will send an email with the link to the folder after the first class.

In advance of our classes, *you must read everyone's submitted work* (unless the weekly assignment specifies otherwise) and come prepared with your written notes, ready to discuss each other's work. At the beginning of class, I will announce the order in which we will be discussing everyone's work (usually in the order turned in according to the time stamp in Google Drive.) If your work includes changes to previously submitted material, those changes must be marked (starred.) **Make sure to clear the stars from previous drafts before revising.**

PDF files will use the following format: *YY.MM.DD-CTWR514B-YOUR NAME-DRAFT INFO.pdf*. Example "24.01.08-CTWR514B-Edwards-Pages1-60.pdf" or "24.01.08-CTWR514B-Smith-Story1-Sequence\_Outline\_rev1.pdf." Please don't send files marked "Screenplay.pdf" or "Rob's Class.pdf"

## Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required

Final Draft is the industry standard. You can use other software; just make sure to proofread your PDFs to avoid the typos that often come with alternative apps. Free versions of most products are available at the [USC Computing Center Laptop Loaner Program](#). Link information for software support and availability. USC

Technology Support Links [Zoom information for students](#), [Blackboard help for students](#), [Software available to USC Campus](#).]

### Description and Assessment of Assignments

I do not grade on content. I evaluate based on the degree to which you master the concepts that I teach in class. If you've written a perfectly structured and heartfelt blockbuster about a subject that only you and your dog care about, you'll be in better shape than a classmate who's written a meaningless, formless glob about the most important subject in the world.

**Table 3 Course schedule**

	<b>Topics/Daily Activities</b>	<b>Readings/Preparation</b>	<b>Deliverables</b>
<b>Week 1</b> January 9	Course Introduction. Discuss the previous semester. Students will pitch feature ideas		Set up your Google Drive folder and post your two-page story summary and character sketches for your <b>FIRST STORY</b> (on PDF to Google Drive by Sunday, January 14 <sup>th</sup> at 11:59 PM)
<b>Week 2</b> January 16	<u>Story #1</u> : Summaries, characters, questions for <b>FIRST IDEA</b>	Have written pitch notes prepared. Rehearse your pitches	Email one or two paragraphs introducing yourself to the instructor. Anything you think I should know. This will be kept in confidence. Post your two-page summary and character sketches for your <b>SECOND IDEA</b> on PDF to Google Drive (NOTE: This will be the standard method of submitting unless otherwise indicated)
<b>Week 3</b> January 23	<u>Story #2</u> : Summaries, characters, goals, worlds, obstacles for <b>SECOND IDEA</b> .	Class discussion. Watch comps, if assigned	Two-page summaries, intentions, obstacles, and character arrays for each story
<b>Week 4</b> January 30	Discuss summaries, characters, and questions. <b>DECIDE</b> between two story ideas for semester script		Character exploration/development for your protagonist and antagonist (or antagonistic forces.) Character array (including goals and flaws.) Thematic elements. Stakes.
<b>Week 5</b> February 6	Discuss protagonists and character arrays for your chosen script idea	Read all sequence breakdowns and prepare to give notes during class	One-page sequence breakdown including arc, stakes, and theme
<b>Week 6</b> February 13	Discuss and elaborate on sequence breakdowns, protagonists, character arrays, and comps	Discuss sequence breakdowns	Turn in revised sequence breakdowns and step outlines for Act One and Act Two (A) (sequences A-D) of your scripts (Filenames "24.01.18-CTWR514B-Yourname-Sequence_Outline(A-D).pdf")

<b>Week 7</b> February 20	Discuss step outlines of sequences A-D	Discuss Act One step outlines	Turn in step outlines of act two (B) and Act Three (sequences E-H) of your script (due on Sunday by 11:59 PM) MID-TERM TO HAND IN: REVISED SEQUENCE BREAKDOWN
<b>Week 8</b> February 27	Discuss step outlines of sequences E-H		CONGRATULATIONS! It's time to write the screenplay. Write and post Act I(A) (Sequence A) (pages 1-15) to Google Drive ("Drafts" folder)
<b>Week 9</b> March 5	Discuss first sequences, ongoing revising outlines while writing, assignment over the break		Complete First Act (Act One (B)) and revise step outline to end of script
March 12 <b>(NO CLASS-SPRING RECESS)</b>			Post complete Act One (pages 1-30) and complete revised step outline on March 17 <sup>th</sup> by 11:59 PM
<b>Week 10</b> March 19	Discuss First Acts (Sequences A-B) (Pages 1-30)		Write Act Two (A) (pages 31-60) NOTE: You're free to write in 45 page chunks to set a more even pace
<b>Week 11</b> March 26	Discuss Act Two (A)		Write Act Two (B) (pages 61-90 <i>aprox</i> )
<b>Week 12</b> April 2	Discus Act Two (B)		Write Act Three (A) (pages 91-105 <i>aprox</i> )
<b>Week 13</b> April 9	Discus Act Three (A)		Write Act Three (B) (pages 106-120)
<b>Week 14</b> April 16	Discus Act Three (B)		<b>Completion of First Draft</b>
<b>FINAL: Week 15</b> April 23	Final thoughts on finishing pages of FIRST DRAFT (discuss plans for moving forward)		Turn in plan for next draft to Google Draft folder: <b>FINAL DUE MAY 3rd</b>

## Participation

The Pixar Braintrust works on a "Yes, and..." format. Make suggestions and add to previous suggestions when possible. I expect conversations to be lively and fun. I also keep track of who talks and for how long. Also, if their ideas are new and relevant or rehashes of things that other students have already said. The best way to show me that you understand the concepts is to apply them to help fix your fellow student's work in class.

## Grading Breakdown

CTWR 514B grades are based on:

Assessment Tool (assignments)	% of Grade
Classroom participation	15%
Two feature ideas	20%
Step outline	25%
Completed screenplay	40%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Grading Scale

Course final grades will be determined using the following scale:

### Course Grading Scale

Letter grade	Corresponding numerical point range
A	95-100
A-	90-94
B+	87-89
B	83-86
B-	80-82
C+	77-79
C	73-76
C-	70-72
D+	67-69
D	63-66
D-	60-62
F	59 and below

## Assignment Submission Policy

Assignments will be posted on the Google Drive folder in PDF format. If files are submitted in other formats, they will not be counted as turned in.

Late assignments can be mitigated by “Funishments” that are due (on paper) at the beginning of the next class. The professor will describe them during class.

The first page of every PDF must include the student’s name, class name, and date. Every page must have a page number.

## Grading Timeline

I generally give mid-course feedback to students in need unless I’ve given feedback during a Zoom Office Hour. You can also grab me after class. I’m a captive audience until I get to my car.

### **Laptop, Cell Phone, and iPad Policy:**

Our goal in class is to have everyone mentally present and one-hundred percent engaged during all discussions. To this end, only the person whose work is being discussed may have an open laptop, for the purpose of taking notes. All other laptops must be closed. Please print out or handwrite your notes on your classmates' work so you may refer to them in class. And please wait until class time to share your notes, so everyone may benefit from your insights, and every idea feels fresh and inspires both the receiver and others in the room.

If you must use an iPad (or similar device) for note-taking, make sure to have it on focus mode so that you are not distracted by text messages or similar pop ups. If you are using your device for anything other than reading and/or taking notes, you will not use your device. Please remember to keep the tone of discussion collaborative, generous, and noncompetitive. The safer everyone feels in discussion, the more likely it will be that you are free to explore and express your creative convictions.

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

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the internet.

### **Attendance**

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 reading in advance (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.

### **Classroom Norms**

This class is meant to prepare you for the professional world. All work will be turned in on time. All classes will start and end on time. All interactions within the classroom will be cordial, professional, and constructive. If any of those elements are a problem, contact me directly and we'll find some strategies to work through them so you're better prepared for life after graduation.

### **AI Policy:**

The uses of generative Artificial Intelligence to create narratives continue to evolve throughout the media workplace. However, it is vital that before relying on AI to assist in aspects of storytelling, 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.

## **Course Content Distribution and Synchronous Session Recordings Policies**

USC has policies that prohibit the recording and distribution of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment.

Recording a university class without the express permission of the instructor and announcement to the class, or unless conducted pursuant to an Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) accommodation. Recording can inhibit free discussion in the future, and thus infringe on the academic freedom of other students as well as the instructor. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

Distribution or use of notes, recordings, exams, or other intellectual property, based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study. This includes but is not limited to providing materials for distribution by services publishing course materials. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information, which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relationship to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the internet, or via any other media. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

## **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](https://osas.usc.edu). You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at [osasfrontdesk@usc.edu](mailto: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 powerbased 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](mailto: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.

### **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](mailto: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.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>PLEASE NOTE: FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX</b></p>
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