



**USC 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 Castillo Martinez  
Class Schedule: Mondays, 4-650pm  
Class Location: SCA 362  
Office Hours: By appointment  
Contact Information: vm75729@usc.edu

**Course Objective:**

We will learn some of the fundamental elements of visual narrative by learning character, conflict and world building. We will explore what makes a character compelling and how to craft dramatic arcs by giving our characters challenges and obstacles. We will learn storytelling basics by understanding the three-act structure. We will analyze and write conflict-driven scenes. We will study compelling characters who have authentic voices and read screenplays with diverse worlds and settings.

After some writing assignments, we will work to complete an outline and then the first act of an original feature-length script.

**Course Description:**

As an introductory course for non-majors, "Fundamentals of Screenwriting" will focus on developing your resources as a storyteller and cultivating your ability to create and develop compelling dramatic characters with cinematic conflict. Students will explore the mechanics of scene work, how to create character arcs, and the 3-act structure. Through scene work, character work, and story development, students will learn the tools of crafting professional scenes. The culmination of this course will be the first act of an original feature script of 25-30 pages.

**Course Reading:**

**Recommended Reading (Books):**

Story, Style, Structure, Substance, and the Principles of Screenwriting - McKee  
Foundations of Screenwriting, Syd Field  
Save the Cat - Blake Snyder

**Screenplays (available online):**

Sideways - Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor

Moonlight - Barry Jenkins and Tarell Alvin McCraney

Ladybird - Greta Gerwig

Everything, Everywhere, All At Once - Daniel Kwan, Daniel Scheinert

\*instructor will be discussing her own screenplay Death of Nintendo throughout the course

**Grading Criteria:**

Students will turn in their work by 1pm every Saturday as a PDF by uploading it to the class GOOGLE DRIVE FOLDER provided on the first class.

**Participation: 20%**

**Scene: Atmosphere 5%**

**Scene: Conflict 5%**

**Scene: Character 5%**

**Scene: Pitch 5%**

**Scene: Dialog 5%**

**Scene: Rewrite 5%**

**Outline: 20%**

**First Act 30%**

**100%**

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

A 100% to 94% A- 93% to 90% B+ 89% to 87% B 86% to 83% B- 82% to 80% C+ 79% to 77%

**Expectation of Professionalism:**

C 76% to 73% C- 72% to 70% D+ 69% to 67% D 66% to 63% D- 62% to 60% D- 62% to 60% F 59% to 0%

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 assignments 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 workshops without the consent of the instructor.

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

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

### **Writing Division Attendance Policy:**

Students are expected to 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](mailto: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.

## Class Schedule:

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

	Topics/Daily Activities	Readings/Preparation	Assignments
<i>Week 1</i> Jan 8	Course Intro Elements of Narrative	Foundations of Screenwriting Death of Nintendo	Core Memory/atmosphere writing assignment read and watch Moonlight
<i>Week 2</i> Jan 15	<b>MLK Day, no class</b>		read and watch Sideways
<i>Week 3</i> Jan 22	Workshop assignment Discussion on characters	Sideways, Moonlight clips from Rocky	read and watch Ladybird Character writing assignment
<i>Week 4</i> Jan 29	Workshop assignment Discussion on Conflict	Ladybird	read and watch Everything, Everywhere, All at Once Conflict scene writing assignment
<i>Week 5</i> Feb 5	Workshop assignment Three act structure	Everything, everywhere, all at once	read Save the Cat, Blake Snyder prepare 5 minute pitch idea
<i>Week 6</i> Feb 12	Pitching session	5 min pitch, any film references	based on Blake Snyder beatsheet, create a one page outline of the idea
<i>Week 7</i> Feb 19	<b>Presidents Day, no class</b>		continue working on outlines Outlines due Group 1
<i>Week 8</i> Feb 26	Workshop Outlines Group 1	screen clips of reference films *watch short film Pria	Outlines due Group 2 Outline revision Group 1
<i>Week 9</i> Mar 4	Workshop Outlines Group 2	screen clips of reference films *watch the President's visit	Outline Revision Group 2
<i>Week 10</i> Mar 11	<b>Spring Break</b>		Write first 10 pages of Act 1
<i>Week 11</i> Mar 18	Workshop pages 1-10  Openings and Introductions	screen clips of reference films	Revise first 10 pages
<i>Week 12</i> Mar 25	Workshop Revisions Planting and payoff	screen clips of reference films	Write pages 10-20 of Act 1
<i>Week 13</i> Apr 1	Workshop pages 10-20		Revise pages 10 - 20
<i>Week 14</i> Apr 8	Workshop Revisions 10- 20		Write pages 20-30 of Act 1
<i>Week 15</i> Apr 15	Workshop pages 20-30		Revise pages 20-30
<i>FINAL</i> Apr 22	Final First Act Due		

## **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](http://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](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

## **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 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](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.