

**CTWR 409: "Fundamentals of Screenwriting: Character, Conflict, & Story"**

**Spring 2024 – 4 units**

**Instructor:** Lee Edward Colston II

**Class Day/Time:** Thursdays, 4pm-6:50pm

**Class Location:** SCA259

**Office Hours:** By email appointment/Zoom

**Contact Information:** [LColston@usc.edu](mailto:LColston@usc.edu)

**Course Objective:**

To learn the professional approach of creating and writing relatable characters, in conflict driven scenes, with an authentic voice. In addition, students will learn 3-act structure and how to create a compelling world. The culmination of 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).

**Required Course Texts & Software:**

*The Tools of Screenwriting* by David Howard and Edward Mabley

*The Emotional Wound Thesaurus* by Angela Ackerman & Becca Puglisi

*Daring Greatly* by Brené Brown (Please purchase BEFORE our first class. All other texts must be purchased by week 2.)

*Backwards and Forwards* by David Ball (Instructor will provide a digital copy. You are welcome to purchase a hard copy if you like.)

*Final Draft 12* for industry standard screenwriting. (You can purchase from [FinalDraft.com](http://FinalDraft.com) at a student discount with your USC student email address.)

**Screenplays:**

1. "Origin" by Ava DuVernay
2. "Coco" by Adrian Molina and Matthew Aldrich
3. "Past Lives" by Celine Song
4. "Hereditary" by Ari Aster
5. "The Silence of the Lambs" by Ted Tally
6. "Pariah" by Dee Rees

**Additional scripts as assigned by instructor\***

\*Note: Instructor will assign scripts of similar tone to your culminating project.

**Grading Criteria:**

**Students will turn in their work by 12pm the day before class. Any assignment turned in by 12:01pm and beyond will be considered LATE. Note: Late assignments will not be read and marked 0%.**

Participation: 10%

Scene: Atmosphere 5%

Scene: Conflict 5%

Scene: Planting & Payoff 5%

Scene: Character Intro 5%

Scene: Dialog 5%

Scene: Rewrite 5%

Character Bios: 15%

Outline: 15%

First Act: 30%

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100%

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

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A 100% to 94%  
 A- 93% to 90%  
 B+ 89% to 87%  
 B 86% to 83%  
 B- 82% to 80%  
 C+ 79% to 77%  
 C 76% to 73%  
 C- 72% to 70%  
 D+ 69% to 67%  
 D 66% to 63%  
 D- 62% to 60%  
 F 59% to 0%

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 assignments are subject to change at the discretion of the professor. \*\*\*]**

**Week 1:** Introduction to Course / **“What is STORY?”** / Principles of Story & Screenwriting / Finding Unique Characters by “Daring Greatly”.

**Reading:** *Daring Greatly*, Introduction + Chapters 1 & 2.

**Assignment #1:** Write 3 short non-dialogue descriptions of Atmosphere (1 - Horror film, 2 - Romance, 3 - Comedy). No characters, just the same setting, three versions. One paragraph each, describing elements seen and heard to create the spirit of a place and the kind of action that happens there. (5%)

**Week 2:** Workshop Scenes of Atmosphere / **WANTS, NEEDS and the CORE EMOTIONAL WOUND / What is CONFLICT?”** / Discuss how to create conflict from the wants and needs of characters.

**Screening:** “Coco”

**Reading:** : *Daring Greatly*, Chapters 3 & 4.

**Assignment #2:** Write a scene of direct conflict between two characters with opposing wants and needs. 3 – 5 pages. (5%)

**Week 3:** Workshop scenes of Direct Conflict / What is **PLOT, PLANTING** and **PAYOFF** in screenwriting?

**Screening of scenes:** “The Silence of the Lambs”

**Reading:** *“Backwards & Forwards” / “The Silence of the Lambs”*

**Assignment #3:** Write 2 scenes utilizing planting (1) and payoff (2). (5%)

**Week 4:** Workshop scenes of Planting and Payoff / What is **NARRATIVE TENSION?** / **LOCATION as CHARACTER:** Enhancing conflict through clash of character and location.

**Reading:** *“Origin”*

**Assignment #4:** Write a character introduction scene that involves the protagonist entering a challenging environment. 3 – 5 pages. (5%)

**Research:** Listen in on at least two (2) conversations during the next week. Take notes of each person’s use of diction and point of view in the situation.

**Week 5:** Workshop Character Introduction Scene / What is **CHARACTER & DIALOGUE?** / Introductions to the pillars of Character and crafting the music of authentic dialogue!

**Assignment #5:** Write a scene with authentic dialog (5%)

**Screening & Reading:** *“Hereditary”*

**Week 6:** Workshop Dialog Scene / What is **3-Act Structure in screenwriting?**

**Assignment #6:** Rewrite a scene using the tools learned over the last several weeks (5%)

**Reading:** *“Past Lives”*

**Week 7:** Workshop Rewritten Scenes / Discuss Character Arc/Change and how it relates to the structure of story. Crafting a **CHARACTER BIOGRAPHY!**

**Assignment #7:** Choose a character you would like to write a feature film script about and create a 2-page bio of that character. Can be a character used in previous scene work or new. (Ungraded).

**Week 8:** Review of Character Bio / Discuss how a story comes out of character.

**Assignment #8:** Write a one page bio of two important people in your main character’s life. Be specific of their influence on the protagonist and points of conflict.

**Reading:** *The Tools of Screenwriting – Basic Storytelling*, pg 19-40

**All 3 Character Bios Due by Next Class (15%)**

**Week 9:** Workshop character bios / Discuss how to create synopsis and outline for a feature film story.

**Reading:** “*Pariah*” by Dee Rees

**Assignment #9:** Write a one page, three-act **synopsis** of your story.

**Research:** Watch assigned films from instructor.

**Week 10:** Workshop Synopsis / Discuss elaboration of conflict in story, subplots and structuring the big dramatic beats.

**Reading:** The Tools of Screenwriting – Analysis, pg 114-274

**Assignment #10:** Write **Outline**.

**Week 11:** Workshop Outline

**Assignment #11:** Revise Outline

**Week 12:** Workshop Outline continued

**Outline Due (15%)**

**Assignment #12:** Write first 5 pages of Act One

Reading: The Tools of Screenwriting – Screenwriting Tools, pg 41-95

*Note: At this point, the Workshop will be divided into two groups, A & B. Please continue to turn in your assigned pages by deadline. Folks who need additional time on their outline will be in Group B.*

**Week 13:** Workshop First Act pages

**Group A:** Workshop first 10 pages

**Group B:** Keep writing (Individual Notes from Instructor)

**Assignment #13:** Write the next 10 pages of Act One

**Week 14:** Workshop First Act pages

**Group A:** Keep writing (Individual Notes from Instructor)

**Group B:** Workshop the first 15 – 20 pages of Act One

**Assignment #13:** Write next 10 pages or til end of Act One.

**Reading:** Read each other’s delivered pages and make notes for discussion.

**Week 15:** **Group A & B:** Receive feedback from group on Act One pages.

**Finals Week: Act One of Feature Script Due (30%)****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 recorded, blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted or shared on any social media or website or anywhere else on the internet at any time.

**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.

**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 the 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.

### **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).

### **Support Systems**

*Student Health Counseling Services - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call*  
[engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://equity.usc.edu), [titleix.usc.edu](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://dps.usc.edu), [emergency.usc.edu](http://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](http://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-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.