

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS

CTWR 415a: Advanced Writing SYLLABUS (2 Units)

Instructor: Ian Jeffers
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Section #: 19366

Class meets: Mondays 10am to 12:50pm
Location: SCA 363
Office hours: Zoom / by appointment

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- *To learn the principles and elements of writing a feature-length story.*
- *To create a story with strong dramatic tension and characters that you're passionate about.*
- *To write a 3-act scene-by-scene outline and the first act of a screenplay.*

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This is an introductory course in developing a feature-length screenplay in which you will discover your resources as a storyteller; your memory and observation, your responsiveness to stories around you, and of course your imagination; your ability to create and develop compelling dramatic characters and great cinematic tales.

The course will lead you through three fundamental aspects of storytelling: how to get started, stimulating inspiration for your work; how to acquire resources for discovering new characters, new worlds and fresh ideas; and techniques for developing (“breaking”) your stories into a detailed outline.

To this end, you will be given weekly assignments that you will either write in class or prepare outside as homework. While you are expected to write these assignments and submit, you will generally be asked not to read what you've written, but to tell your stories in class. The idea is to develop your skills at verbally holding an audience's attention.

By the middle of the semester, you'll focus on a single feature idea you'll develop into a short (1-5 page) outline, then push into writing the first draft of a complete first act.

The give-and-take of classroom discussion is a substantial aspect of the course. You are expected to participate and engage in the development of the stories of the other members of the class. Be as constructive, supportive and enthusiastic as you can!

For many of you this semester will be your first foray into developing a feature screenplay.

You'll be writing an outline and the first act of a feature script in which you create 3-dimensional characters and an interesting, surprising story in a 3-act structure, hopefully one that you'll love and want to continue working on.

As legions of writers have noted, story is character – as John Galsworthy wrote, “The best plot is a human being.” If you create living, breathing, complex characters, they help you to generate the story and make it more unpredictable. So, we will start off with the creation and development of our characters, making sure we know who they are and what they want.

We'll work on premise, story structure, scene structure, character bios, character objectives, conflict, and dialogue as you write the outline and move into writing the first act.

Our weekly class sessions will include lectures on elements of screenwriting, reading and workshop discussion of students' work, and viewing of film clips. The schedule and assignments may be adjusted to help us accomplish what we want more effectively. There may also be individual conferences to address the needs of each student and his or her material.

The screenplay outlined and written in this class must be the sole original work of the writer. No adaptations (or co-written/ co-developed projects) will be accepted without the prior written permission of the instructor.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Attendance is mandatory. Unexcused absences will result in your grade being lowered. Students will read each other's work and provide constructive, considered feedback to their fellow writers. Energetic, positive, courteous participation in class is an invaluable part of the course (and it's fun).

Here is the official Writing Division Attendance Policy:

Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Two unexcused absences will result in your grade being lowered by one full point (ex: A to B). A third unexcused absence will result in your grade being lowered another full point (ex: B to C). Two late arrivals equate to one full absence. In order for an absence to be excused the student must have approval from the professor and provide documentation at the next attended class session. Please note 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. As a reminder: All students and employees should evaluate themselves before coming to campus and stay home from work/class if they are experiencing symptoms. The latest [COVID-19 figures for campus](https://coronavirus.usc.edu) are available on <https://coronavirus.usc.edu>. You may pick up antigen test kits (at no charge) from the USC bookstores, Engemann and Eric Cohen student health centers, and from the

CSC desks in USC Housing. If you have an emergency or illness and must miss class, please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

2. Assignments are to be completed and submitted by specified due dates as discussed in class. Consistently late work will impact your grade for the course.

3. Your assignments will be read and discussed in class so be sure to turn them in on time to allow your classmates ample time to read and develop constructive notes.

Please do not use computers crashing, printers breaking, or other mechanical failures as reasons for not completing your assignments. Back up frequently to the cloud or external drives (and/or print) for safety and peace of mind.

SCRIPT FORMAT:

GET SCREENWRITING SOFTWARE. You will be required to write in standard script format. Use a screenwriting program like Final Draft (the industry standard by far) or MovieMagic. There are also very workable free online options e.g. WriterDuet (a standard in the gaming world), Celtx etc.

Good writing is rewriting and it's also proofreading. Make sure to correct all typos, dropped words, misattributed dialogue, bad grammar, and misspellings. That said, in dialogue, all grammatical bets are off as you should be writing dialogue as spoken by people in the wild. Also, in action description, complete sentences are not at all mandatory. Strive for immediacy, elegance and coherence in description, but full grammatical sentences are not necessarily the rule. We'll look at many examples of 'telegraphic,' bullet, fragmentary, single-word sentence, and other poetic-visual creative language use in action and description from master writers and writer-directors.

RECOMMENDED READING:

You don't need to buy any of these, but below are some optional books you may find helpful on your dramatic writing journey. We will discuss in class!

The Tools of Screenwriting - David Howard and Edward Mabley

The Elements of Screenwriting - Irwin Blacker

The Art of Dramatic Writing - Lajos Egri

Making a Good Script Great - Linda Seger

Story - Robert McKee

Actions: The Actors' Thesaurus - Marina Calderone & Maggie Lloyd-Williams

Poetics - Aristotle

Gilgamesh - Herbert Mason translation

The Film That Changed My Life: 30 Directors - Robert K. Elder

Martin Scorsese: Interviews - Peter Brunette

On Directing - Harold Clurman

Directing Actors - Judith Weston
In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing - Walter Murch

And several FEATURE SCREENPLAYS and one or two SERIES PILOTS I will share / assign.

GRADING CRITERIA:

Classroom participation - 20%
Character bios and premise - 20%
3-Act outline - 30%
Draft of Act 1 - 30%

Per Writing Division policy, the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:

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

Outstanding work will get an A. Good work will get a B. Ordinary/average work will get a C. And so on. Sincere creative artistic effort will be by far the most important factor in your grade.

SEMESTER SCHEDULE:

Week 1 Introductions. Review of syllabus. Course goals and student expectations.
Topics: Discovering your story; elements of character, world and theme. Basics of act structure: Act 1 - Your world, who's in it, inherent conflicts and inciting incidents / Act 2 - The great journey begins / Act 3 - The great convergence. Acts vs. Sequences.

Assignment: Three "germs" for a possible story.

Week 2 Present three ideas. Be prepared to pitch to class and discuss.
Topics: Importance of main character, goals, and obstacles; How story grows from character; the dramatic "pyramid." Melding story and act progression with character progression. What's your genre, and how do you get out of it?

Assignment: Choose story. Define your main characters. Write brief character bios, including leads' & secondary characters' wants and goals ('objectives'); main conflicts / challenges.

Week 3 Discuss main character bios; Discuss the emerging shape of your story.
Topics: Pity the actor: Character objectives, conflicts, main tension, culmination, resolution. Pity the director, even if it's you: Chaining your sequences. BOOAT: **B**io / **O**bjectives / **O**bstacles / **A**rcs-Adaptations / **T**heme. Going deep: Icebergs and tips of icebergs.

Assignment: One-page version of story, with a sense of beginning, middle, and end, and ideally, a sense of character progression.

Week 4 Discuss one-page version of story.
Topics: The Importance of choice & originality in location & environment.
Setting up your story: setting up expectations and how to violate them. Escalation and surprise. Show vs. Tell.

Assignment: Begin Act 1 outline.

Week 5 Discuss Act 1 Outline. Discuss openings and closings of Act 2.
Topics: Act 2: The Great Journey; Milestones, Midpoints, and Act Breaks.

Assignment: Finish Act 1 outline; Begin Act 2 outline (up to midpoint) with brief descriptions of opening and closing scenes of Act 2.

Week 6 Discuss Act 2 outline (up to midpoint)
Topics: Setups and Payoffs. Costume, props, dialogue. Action within scenes.

Assignment: Finish Act 2 outline.

Week 7 Discuss second-half of Act 2 outline.

Topics: Act 3 surprises. Salting the ending and sticking the landing: How to end your story.

Assignment: Finish revised Act 1 and Act 2 outline. Write Act 3 outline.

Week 8 Discuss Act 3 Outline - Discuss Act 3 openings and endings.

Topics: Subplots and Complications: Secondary Characters. Time frame of story; building to a climax. Worthy enemies: antagonists vs rivals. On the page: the secrets of good dialogue and effective action / description.

Assignment: Write opening scene of screenplay; continue work on outline.

Week 9 Read and workshop opening scenes.

Topics: More on dialogue & Subtext. Dialogue vs. Behavior; eloquent actions.

Assignment: Finish outline of screenplay; bring in rewritten opening scene.

Week 10 Workshop rewritten opening scenes. Discuss cast list and secondary character subplots.

Topics: Recap: maintaining dramatic tension within scenes and throughout the story.

Assignment: 1st 10 pages of Act 1.

Week 11 Discuss 1st 10 pages of Act 1.

Topics: Verbal setups; economy and clarity of language. View film clips.

Assignment: Revise 1st 10 pages of Act 1.

Week 12 Workshop new Act 1 pages.

Topics: Character voices; winding the clock: more on inciting incidents and inherent conflicts.

Assignment: 2nd 10 pages of Act 1.

Week 13 Workshop new Act 1 pages.

Topics: Revisit Acts 1-3; your sequences; structure, character, and theme.

Assignment: Last 5-10 pages -- finish Act 1 of screenplay.

Weeks 14-15 Workshop new Act 1 scenes in context of the full story.

Topics: Next Steps!

Statement on Academic Integrity:

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. Scampus, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/>. Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at: <http://www.usc.edu/studentaffairs/SJACS/>.

Students Needing Accommodations:

Any student requesting academic accommodations is required to register with the Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from OSAS; please be sure this letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. OSAS is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday.

Telephone is (213) 740-0776.

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. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct: policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Support Systems:

Student Counseling Services - (213) 740-7711

engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. On-call counselor 8:0 a.m. – 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, for urgent appointments. Located at Engemann Student Health Center Suite 304.

USC Student Support & Advocacy/ 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.

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 for Equity, Opportunity, and Title IX - (213) 740-5086 /
equity.usc.edu, titleix.usc.edu, eotix.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.

Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) - (213) 740-0776 /
osas.usc.edu

Support and accommodations for students. 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; campussupport.usc.edu

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-mail 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.

PLEASE NOTE: FOOD AND DRINKS (YES, EVEN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX