

USC Cinematic Arts

Land Acknowledgement

USC acknowledges that we are on the traditional land of the Tongva People. For thousands of years, the Tongva people lived on this land we occupy today and were considered the most powerful indigenous peoples to inhabit the Los Angeles basin. Along with the Tongva, we also recognize the Chumash, Tataviam, Serrano, Cahuilla, Juaneño, and Luiseño People, for the land that USC also occupies around Southern California. To learn about the Indigenous land on which your learning location resides, please visit Native-Land.ca to discover the Original People of your home.

CTWR 206a: Writing the Screenplay (Section 19156)

Units: 2

Fall 2024—Friday—1:00-3:50pm

Location: SCA 363

Link to Course Brightspace: <https://brightspace.usc.edu/d2l/home/124128>

Instructor: Jeremy Novick

Office: SCA Adjunct Office, Zoom Office Hours

Office Hours: By appointment

Contact Info: jnovick@usc.edu

Course Description

Since the beginning of Hollywood's entertainment industry, the feature film has been one of the core metrics of competency for professional writers. CTWR 206 is first major instructional course aimed at teaching the skills necessary to tell a compelling, cohesive, visual story within a 90-120 framework. The course is partly instructional – with lectures and materials aimed at teaching the basics of character development, structure, and scene work – but it is mostly practical application. We will learn how to write a screenplay the best way there is to learn: *by writing one*. In trying, at times failing, and ultimately succeeding, you will all cultivate a better understanding of your own personal voice and style, our diverse and complimentary points of view on the world, and of what makes “a good story well told.”

Learning Objectives

Our goal is to learn the skills and techniques utilized by professional screenwriters to ideate, outline, and draft feature-length screenplays in a workshop setting. The first semester of this two-semester course will culminate in students writing and presenting a full outline and the first act of their feature screenplays.

Recommended Preparation

As this is a course designed to teach you the basic skills necessary to write a feature-length screenplay, it is helpful to familiarize yourself with the medium as much as possible. That means, essentially: Watch and read as many movies as you can before this course starts. You would be amazed at how much you can glean, even from your favorite films you've seen a hundred times, once you start watching and reading them from an analytical point of view. What do they make you feel? How do they evoke those emotions so effectively? What is it about these films that you love so much? Knowing more specifically how and why you like the things you like will help you evoke those feelings in your audience.

Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required

All scenes will be written in standard script format using professional screenwriting software such as "Final Draft." **If you don't have access to screenwriting software, please see me immediately, and we will work on an alternative solution together.**

Suggested Course Reading

The following titles are suggested reading by the instructor. While these books are not required for the course, they are invaluable tools that students will be able to refer to throughout the course and long into their careers:

The Tools of Screenwriting, by David Howard and Edward Mabley

Screenwriting is Rewriting by Jack Epps, Jr.

Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters by Michael Tierno

Screenplays to be assigned by the instructor on a case-by-case basis.

Description and Assessment of Assignments

Participation

This is a workshop class at its heart. As such, it is imperative that we all read everyone's work prior to class time and are prepared with thoughtful, constructive, and respectful notes. Failure to come prepared to class will be reflected in grading. The workload here is significant, but it is worth it. You will get out of this class what you put into it.

Grading Breakdown

10% = Participation
10% = Pitching Loglines
10% = Protagonist/Antagonist Biographies
10% = "BME" Treatment
10% = Beat Sheet
10% = First Draft Outline
10% = Revised Outline
10% = First Sequence
10% = Second Sequence
10% = Final Revised Act One

Grading Scale

Course final grades will be determined using the following scale:

Letter Grade & Percentage Range

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%

Assignment Submission Policy

Students will turn in their work by midnight on the Wednesday before class each week, by a method to be determined by the instructor, typically in a secure shared Google Drive folder. All work will be sent to the instructor, as well as all classmates, so that feedback can be given. This deadline is extremely important. As a workshop-style course, it is vital that we read each other's material and come prepared for class, and we must be respectful of each other's time in doing that work. If you repeatedly fail to meet weekly deadlines without communication, it will affect grading.

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. **Spellcheck and proofread** your assignment prior to submission. We are all taking the time to read your work; you should, too.

Grading Timeline

Students will receive verbal feedback in class from each other and from the instructor and will receive written notes via email within 24-48 hours of class.

Course Specific Policies

Laptops are to be used solely for scene work being discussed in class, and only with the permission of the instructor. Cell phones will be turned off. **Please note: You should always have a notebook/pen available.**

Attendance

Students are expected to be on time, prepared for each class, and meet professional standards. CTWR 206 only meets once a week, and timely attendance is mandatory. Failure to attend all class sessions from beginning to end may affect grades. 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 equate to one full absence.

NOTE: Exceptions will be made in the case of religious holidays and DSP accommodations.

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

Exemptions to the attendance policy will be allowed on a case-by-case basis and must be supported by a written accommodation request from the USC Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS).

Students who become ill and need to self-isolate will be supported in their efforts to stay current with classwork and assignments. Faculty are no longer required to provide an option for students to Zoom into class. However, Faculty may choose to use Zoom at their discretion to help students stay current in their course work.

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.

Students must contact the professor 24 hours prior to class start time if they need to miss class for any reason.

Classroom Norms

All students are required to sign the 206 Code of Conduct Contract, which outlines in more detail the expectations of behavior in class, but a few guidelines are listed below:

- Always come to class prepared and ready to discuss your classmates' work. We all work hard on our writing, and we each deserve the same effort and attention from each other.
- Listen actively and attentively in class, and without interrupting, even when you disagree with what is being said.

- Treat others with respect. Writing can be an emotional endeavor, where we pull from our own, sometimes painful, personal experiences. It is vital that we foster a culture where students feel free to share themselves without fear of judgment or retaliation.
- Be aware that tone of voice and body language can be powerful communicators. Crossed arms, eye rolls, loud sighs, etc., can provoke or intimidate others, while facing the speaker, remaining quiet, nodding, smiling, etc., can encourage and show you are listening respectfully.
- When giving notes or feedback, remember that the goal is to help someone else make their story the best version of their story it can be. Try not to point out problems without a proposed solution, or simply tear down someone else's idea. And whenever possible, try not to change another student's work with ideas solely about how you would write it; we should endeavor to provide feedback that fosters everyone's unique, individual voice.
- Do not isolate or exclude others from discussion. We are all equals in this workshop.

Zoom Etiquette

If we need to meet for class over Zoom, or if a student must attend class via Zoom due to illness or other extenuating circumstances, there are a few rules to etiquette to follow:

- Do not give out the Zoom link to anyone who is not in our class.
- Keep yourself muted unless it is your turn to speak.
- Unless otherwise noted or called on, use the hand raise feature and wait for your turn to speak.
- Do not send private messages in the chat feature, and do not use the group chat feature to say anything disruptive or unrelated to our classroom discussion.

Academic Integrity

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>.

If found responsible for an academic violation, students may be assigned university outcomes, such as suspension or expulsion from the university, and grade penalties, such as an "F" grade on the assignment, exam, and/or in the course.

Artificial Intelligence

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.

Course Content Distribution and Synchronous Session Recordings Policies

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).

Course Evaluations

Mid-term and end-of-term course evaluations are a vital part of improving the efficacy of this course for future students, and it is mandated by the University. When evaluations are sent out, the instructor will leave the room to allow students to privately fill them out. Please be honest in your evaluation, as it not only improves the curriculum, but it can also improve the instructor's skills.

Course Schedule

All dates, assignments, and subjects may change at the discretion of the instructor.

Week 1: A Good Story Well Told (Introductions, Screening, Discussion)

- Introductions, syllabus, the "Constructive Contract," and the principles of writing a screenplay. What makes "a good story well told?"
- Screening: Act One of "How to Train Your Dragon"
- **Assignment #1:** Finish watching HTTYD on your own. Write a 1–2-page analysis of the film, answer the following:
 - Who is the main character? Name a strength of theirs, a flaw of theirs, and a contradiction of theirs.
 - What does the main character want? Why do they want it? What happens if they don't get it?
 - What stands in the way of the character getting what they want? What makes it hard for them?
 - Who is the main antagonist? Name a strength, flaw, and contradiction of theirs as well.
 - Try your best to write a 1-2 sentence logline for the movie.
- **Assignment #2:** Come up with five (5) loglines to pitch for your feature film. Don't worry about the loglines being perfect; we'll get better at that as we go. But be ready to pitch these ideas verbally in class next week (10%).

Week 2: It All Starts with Character

- Discuss our movie analyses, and revisit our question: "What makes a good story well told?"
- Pitch loglines and discuss ideas for our feature films. Narrow your loglines down and choose one (1) that you will write this year.
- **Assignment #3:** Write a biography for both your protagonist and antagonist (1 page each), including what their arc is in the movie. Then, write 1-page letters from your protagonist to your antagonist, and vice versa (10%).

Week 3: Theme & Finding Your North Star

- Review character biographies. Discuss the concept of a "North Star."
- **Assignment #4:** Write a 1-page "North Star Statement," highlighting what excites you about this story and why you feel compelled to tell it.

Week 4: The Treatment

- Discuss North Stars, and how we can use them as guidance in breaking the story. Discussion on treatments and how to nail the important beats of a story.
- **Assignment #5:** Write "BME" (Beginning, Middle and End) Treatment for your film. Don't worry about specific structure just yet; the goal with these is to illustrate how your character's external

journey pushes them along their internal journey and bolsters your theme and North Star (10%).

Week 5: The Big Film Structure Lecture

- Discuss BME Treatments. Lecture on 3-act and 8-sequence feature structure, handout provided.
- Screening: Kurt Vonnegut, “Shapes of Stories”
- **Assignment #6:** Put together a “beat sheet” for your story (examples will be provided), with your act breaks and sequences labeled. Things to look for here: A strong opening. Inciting incident is big. By end of Act One, protagonist is actively driving the plot, pursuing a high-stakes goal. Obstacles and antagonists are formidable. Midpoint, external is escalating, internal- things start to crack. Act Two is the lowest point one can get. Externally and internally. Act Three they change and fight biggest battle yet and actively cause their own resolution. Strong closing (10%).

Week 6: Therefore, And Then, & But / B-Stories & Subplots

- Discuss and workshop Beat Sheets. Talk about the difference “therefore,” “and then,” and “but” as it pertains to your stories.
- Discuss the addition of subplots and how they can bolster your main tension.
- **Assignment #6:** Revise your beat sheets, adding your subplots for supporting characters and including “therefores” and “buts” between each scene.

Week 7: Fall Recess

- No class this week. Fall recess. Continue to work on outlines. Instructor will assign scripts and other documents to read that are germane to your story.

Week 8: The Outline

- Discuss and workshop treatments, and discuss the move onto outline, with examples and Q&A about what an outline really is.
- **Assignment #7:** Prepare a first draft of your full feature outline (examples will be provided), elaborating on the moments in your beat sheet and connecting the dots between them, and introducing any subplots with supporting characters (10%).

Week 9: The Outline II: Electric Boogaloo / How to Give Notes

- Discuss and workshop outlines. We are looking to identify and fix as many story and character issues at this stage as we possibly can, so they don’t pop up in the actual script. This means we are all going to get notes, HOWEVER, per our Constructive Contract, we are still going to remain helpful, supportive, and respectful. This means we will also have a brief lecture (or refresher course) on how to give – and take – good, solid creative notes.
- **Assignment #8:** Revise outlines based on notes from the class (10%).

Week 10: Leave It All on the Page

- Discuss and workshop outlines. At this point, we will hopefully all be moving onto pages, but likely, we may need another week with outline. This is okay!
- **Assignment #8:** Begin writing your first sequence (10%).

Week 11: How to Grab the Reader

- Workshop first sequences. Brief discussion on the importance of the first 10 pages.
- **Assignment #9:** Revise your first sequences.

Week 12: Veteran’s Day

- No class this week. Veteran’s Day Observed. Continue revising your first sequences.

Week 13: How to Keep the Reader Interested

- Workshop first sequences
- **Assignment #10:** Begin writing your second sequence (10%).

Week 14: Thanksgiving

- No class this week. Thanksgiving.

Week 15: Found in the Desert (Or “How to Not Get Overwhelmed When Writing Act Two”)

- Workshop second sequences. Discussion about Act Two.
- **Assignment #12:** Revise and combine your pages to complete your First Act.

Finals Week: Final pages for Act One due by midnight on Friday, December 13. Please submit your final pages to our class Google Drive, and send them in an email directly to me as well, to ensure that no assignments are lost.

The School of Cinematic Arts Support Systems and Statements

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 persons 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 or anonymously submit a report on SCA Community: <https://scacommunity.usc.edu/secure/diversityEquity/> You can also read more about how to report discrimination based on a protected class here: <https://eeotix.usc.edu/get-help/what-are-my-choices-text/>

SCA Office of Student Services

213-740-8358 or StudentAffairs@cinema.usc.edu

SCA Embedded Therapists

Students enrolled in an SCA major program can schedule an appointment with an embedded therapist for the School of Cinematic Arts through the student health portal [MySHR](#).

SCA Community

For additional SCA resources please visit scacommunity.usc.edu

Creative Technology and Support

(213) 821-4571

creativetech@cinema.usc.edu

Location: SCA 128

Support Hours: Monday - Friday, 8:30 AM - 8:30 PM

<https://knowledgebase.sca.usc.edu/>

<https://workstations.sca.usc.edu/>

Physical Production Office

The Physical Production Office assists students and faculty with production-related matters including production numbers, locations, permits, insurance, gear and equipment vendors, safety issues, and crew and actor policies. More information can be found by visiting the online [Production Procedures and Safety Handbook](#). The Physical Production Office is located at SCA 304 and is open every weekday from 9am-5pm (Fridays 9am-1pm). You can also reach the Office by calling 213-740-1298 or by email at spo@cinema.usc.edu.

Office of Industry Relations
School of Cinematic Arts - SCA 235
(213) 740-4432
ir@cinema.usc.edu

Cinematic Arts Library Research Guide
<https://libguides.usc.edu/cinema>

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 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 accommodation is not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Support Systems:

COVID-19 Resource Center - <https://coronavirus.usc.edu/what-should-i-do/>

[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

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.

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