



School of Cinematic Arts
The John Wells Division of
Writing for Screen and Television

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](https://www.usc.edu/native-land) to discover the Original People of your home.

CTWR 413: Writing the Short Script 1
Fall 2024 – 2 units

Class Day/Time: Monday, 10:00 am – 12:50 pm

Class Location: SCA 342

Link to Brightspace: <https://brightspace.usc.edu/d2l/home/126496>

Instructor: Valerie Mayhew

Office Hours: Private meetings available by appointment, in person or via Zoom

Contact: vmayhew@usc.edu (I try to respond to emails within 48 hours)

Course Description

This is an introductory class in writing for the screen in which you will learn and develop your craft as a storyteller, drawing on your memories, experiences, observation, and of course imagination to create compelling characters and tales.

Together we will read and critique a series of weekly assignments, both in and outside the class, designed to help you understand the fundamentals of screenwriting. You will learn to bring your visual and aural senses to your writing, to see and hear your film as you write it, developing and exploring your characters through situations of conflict.

At the end of the class, you will apply your skills to writing a short narrative *5-6 page CTPR 310 script*.

Learning Objectives

- To understand the craft of screenwriting
- To learn and practice the elements of a "Simple story well told."
- To strengthen & deepen your ability to conceive compelling ideas, characters and stories through experience and observation
- To learn to write from a visual and aural perspective
- To learn narrative structure
- To learn the building blocks of the dramatic scene.
- To write a short script screenplay

Course Notes

Grading of this course is by Letter grade.

All PowerPoint presentations and reading excerpts will be posted on Brightspace.

Required screenplay readings will be distributed via email.

Technological Proficiency and Software Required

Final Draft (preferred) or other screenwriting software is required. A student trial of Final Draft is available at www.finaldraft.com/edu-trial/

Optional Course Reading

No books are required but the following are recommended:

Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott

The Tools of Screenwriting by David Howard and Edward Mabley

Your Screenplay Sucks by William Akers

On Writing by Stephen King

Participation

Class participation includes full involvement in and contribution to all class discussions, as well as reading (in advance at times; see schedule below) the assignments of the other students and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.

Timely attendance is mandatory and failure to attend all class sections from beginning to end may affect grades.

- Exemptions 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 in an effort to help students stay current in their course work.

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

Grading and Rubrics

<i>Writing Assignments:</i>	<i>50%</i>
<i>Readings and Class Participation:</i>	<i>20%</i>
<i>Final Script:</i>	<i>30%</i>
TOTAL CLASS	100%

Final Script Grading Rubric

<i>Story</i>	<i>30%</i>
<i>Formatting</i>	<i>30%</i>
<i>Character</i>	<i>20%</i>
<i>Dialogue</i>	<i>20%</i>

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

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%

NOTE: If you are Writing for Screen and Television major or minor, you must receive a grade of C or better to receive degree credit.

Writing Division Attendance Policy

Students are expected to be on time, prepared for each class, and meet professional standards. CTWR 413 meets once a week and timely attendance is mandatory and 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 in an effort 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.

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 blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the internet.

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.

Class Schedule

Please note that all lectures and assignments are subject to change at the discretion of the professor.

● **WEEK ONE, August 26th – It's Not Me, It's You: Breaking Up with Your Ego and Becoming a Screenwriter**

In Class Lecture: Introduction to the course and overarching objectives, including a brief overview of production guidelines for CTPR310. Discussion of Critique vs. Criticism. Tips for reading screenplays.

In Class Assignment: "Trip to School" Tell us about a real event that happened to you on your way to school or on your way home from school. It could be any school and any age.

In Class Discussion: This should focus on the protagonist of this memory, YOU, and evoke what you most wanted, loved, feared, etc. during this brief journey.

Assignment for Next Class: Two or Three 5-minute film ideas, a short paragraph each. Keep this as basic and simple as possible – no need to have a full story. The focus should be on introducing us to your protagonist.

● **WEEK TWO - *NO CLASS MONDAY SEPTEMBER 2nd for Labor Day***

● **WEEK THREE, September 9th – The Magic Formula – Protagonist + Objective + Obstacle = Conflict**

In Class Lecture: The point of all writing is communication. How scripts work and why. Learning industry standard formatting. Discussion of the Magic Formula. Conflict is the energy that drives story! How to create three-dimensional characters that pursue goals and face conflict as they move through your story

In Class Discussion: Writer's Room discussion of your short film ideas with a focus on character.

Assignment for Next Class: Choose the best one or two of your ideas and write a half page on each. Dig deeper into the way your character pursues goals and faces conflict as they move through their journey. Be sure to incorporate the class discussions.

● **WEEK FOUR, September 16th** – Don't Panic, There's a Map

In Class Lecture: The Character's Journey. How to turn a scene. How Short Films work: How a Short is the same as - and different from - a feature. Examples.

Assignment Due: Focused short film ideas. Writer's Room discussion of how each of your fellow writer's feel about your ideas.

Assignment for Next Class: Read a professional screenplay or TV pilot assigned by the instructor. Be prepared to discuss: Who is the main character? What do they actively want in the story? Who (or what) is the primary source of opposition to their goal?

● **WEEK FIVE, September 23rd** – Formatting is Your Friend or No, You Can't Write a Script on Your Phone

In Class Lecture: How scripts work. Professional screenplay format and how to use style to express your personal voice. Understanding dialogue, the multi-tool of screenwriting.

Assignment Due: Discussion of assigned screenplay.

Assignment for Next Class: "The Worst Person in the World" 3 – 4 page screenplay with emphasis on character and dialogue. (See Assignment Appendix.)

● **WEEK SIX, September 30th** – Angels and Cops and Doctors, Oh My!

In Class Lecture: My Rules have Rules – Writing Authentic Worlds , Development steps

Assignment Due: "The Worst Person in the World" Discussion of work.

In Class Writing Assignment: "True/False" (see Assignment Appendix)

Assignments for Next Class: 1. "New Worlds" (see Assignment Appendix) 2. 3 Loglines for 310 ideas.

● **WEEK SEVEN, October 7th – Is it Okay That I Need Tap-Dancing Rhinos?**

In Class Lecture: Production limits are our friend. It's not writing, it's rewriting.

Assignment Due: 1. "New Worlds" Discussion of work and process. Issues and challenges of research methods. What worked and what didn't?
2. Three Loglines and discussion.

Assignment for Next Class: Revised Loglines

● **WEEK EIGHT, October 14th – Your Producer Isn't Psychic**

In Class Lecture: Development Step Two – The Treatment/Outline. How to get an idea out of your head and into someone else's.

Assignment Due: Revised Loglines for 310 Instructors

****310 Instructors Visit Classes****

Assignment for Next Class: Treatment/Outline for strongest logline(s)

● **WEEK NINE, October 21st – We Got the Beat**

In Class Lecture: Development Step Three – The Beat Sheet. What exactly is "A Beat" (why yes, Stanislavski had an accent.) Think verbs and action.

Assignment Due: Treatments. Writer's room class discussion.

Assignment for Next Class: Beat Sheet for one chosen project.

● **WEEK TEN, October 28th - Yes, You Can Get There from Here**

In Class Lecture: Development Step – The First Draft. How to get from action beats to a full screenplay.

Assignment Due: Beat Sheet. Writer's room class discussion.

Assignment for Next Week: Revised Beat Sheet.

● **WEEK ELEVEN, November 11th** – The Swiss Army Knife of Screenwriting: Dialogue

In Class Lecture: Finding your voice and your character's.

Assignment Due: Revised Beat Sheets. Writer's room class discussion.

Assignment for Next Class: The First Draft

● **WEEK TWELVE, *NO CLASS MONDAY, NOVEMBER 11th for Veterans Day***

● **WEEK THIRTEEN, November 25th** – First is Not Final

NOTE: Yes, it's Thanksgiving Week, but You Still Need to Come to Class

In Class Lecture: How Rewriting works: Tools and Techniques of the Rewrite. How to use Revision Mode in Final Draft

Assignment Due: First Drafts. Writer's room class discussion.

Assignment for Next Class: Second Drafts

● **WEEK FOURTEEN, December 2nd** – **LAST CLASS**

In Class Lecture: The Hollywood Secret - Perseverance

Assignment Due: Second Drafts. Writer's room class discussion.

Assignment for The Final: The Final Draft and the "Final Critique Project" (see Assignment Appendix.)

● FINALS WEEK – DECEMBER 11TH – 18TH

Assignments due for “Final Exam”: The Final Draft and “Final Critique Project”

******ASSIGNMENT APPENDIX ******

“The Worst Person in the World” aka “Wrongest [sic] Person”/“Intruder”/“Wrong Arrival”

Length: 3 - 4 pages

Assignment: This is a dialogue scene between two characters*.

The setup: Character A waits for Character B but Character C shows up first.

Character C should be, from what we know of Character A and their plans, the absolute worst person who could arrive.

Character A must get rid of Character C before they cross paths with character B!

But, character A cannot come out and say exactly why character C must leave.

The audience must know what is being planned and the stakes involved. (But this cannot be conveyed via dialogue on the phone, answering machine, texted etc.)

Character C must be entirely motivated to stay.

The scene ends immediately when Character B arrives, whether Character A is successful in getting rid of character C, or not.

*You may have Character B speak a *few* words for humorous or dramatic effect, but they must be the last person to speak. **This is a two person scene.**

You may have non-speaking background characters for atmosphere purposes only. They cannot influence the scene in any way, and their presence cannot help or hinder any character’s goals. (test: Would this scene be exactly the same without the background character(s) except for realism/accuracy of place?)

C's arrival should not be random, as in 'A prepares dinner for their mother but a robber shows up.' That's too easy. The idea is that C worst person given who B is.

Be sure to keep an eye on:

- 1) Character - They must be unique characters who want something.
- 2) Dialogue - Expressive, Character Revealing, Not overly literal, Distinct voices (rhythm, syntax, word choice, etc).
- 3) Story Structure - If your story ends on a good news beat, you should have a Moment of Apparent Defeat before the final success. If your story ends on a bad news beat, you should have a Moment of Apparent Success before the final defeat.

"True or False"

Length: ½ to ¾ page each

Assignment: Write two prose stories, one totally true and the other totally false. Each story is read aloud* in class. The class will vote on which story they believe is true which is false. The "winning" student is the one with the most 'true' votes for their fake story.

*NB: To avoid students being able to use the 'process of elimination' to pick the true story, the instructor should collect all the stories, randomize them, and read them themselves.

"New Worlds" aka "The Research Project" aka "Professions"

Length: 2 to 4 pages

Assignment: Write a 2-4 page screenplay with two or more people who do/belong to a specific job/sport/hobby/social group you know nothing about.

You'll be graded on the realism of the job/hobby/world details and lifestyle that are expressed in *dialogue* and to a much lesser extent, description. (i.e. you can't just write a really good description of the things you see and call it a day. This is a DIALOGUE exercise!) It's about the lingo, nomenclature, values and rhythms of these characters.

Will we believe you know how two people in a submarine talk and about what? Or a dry cleaner? Or a dentist office? Or two darts champions? We must understand what's going on in the scene and why.

The priority is to write believable characters, not jam the story full of jargon.

No 'CSI'-Style Dialogue where one character explains their job to someone doing the same job.

NB: Be extremely careful when including "outsiders" and/or neophytes. When an "expert" talks to a "non-expert" (or an "insider" to an "outsider") they - by the very nature of these roles - have to speak in a way that's accessible and general. The assignment is to do the opposite of that.

"Seduction/Persuasion"

Length: 3 – 4 pages

Assignment: One character ("The Seducer") wants another character ("The Mark") to do something. The Seducer should know exactly what leverage to use, or should be able to figure it out. The reward should be appealing to the person being seduced, but that person should have legitimate, character-revealing opposition to doing it. The seduction/persuasion should escalate to the point where the reader legitimately can't guess how it will end. The scene ends when The Mark agrees or doesn't.

"Final Critique Project"

Length: No more than ½ page per script read.

Assignment: Students should read each of the 310 Final drafts and write a brief critique of each script, using the language of Critique versus Criticism.

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 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 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