

**USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS**  
**John Wells Division of Writing**

---

**CTWR 543 *The Character-Driven Screenplay***  
**FALL 2024 SYLLABUS (4 Units)**

Instructor: David Hollander  
Email: DavidHol@usc.edu  
Section: 19289

Class Meets: T 7-10 PM  
Location: SCA 255  
Office Hours: By appointment

**Course Description and Objective:**

This course will focus on developing and writing the first draft of a screenplay with the emphasis on character as story engine.

Great scripts depend on strong, compelling characters. By truly understanding those characters – their back stories, their strengths and flaws, their wants and needs – the writer can discover the story organically and determine the best way to tell it.

This course will delve deeply into the difference between character want and character need. We will create a shared language around this concept. Character want - defined by what the character knows they desire - will be the essential driver of their external actions. Character need – defined by what we as the authors know they ultimately should have - will be the work of the individual writer’s deeper understanding of their character – will be the driver of the stories internal obstacle. It is in the tension between these two drivers that the conflict of the story will truly live.

In essence, when writing any character, it is our job to know them better than they know themselves.

Dynamic screen characters don’t live in isolation; they have relationships with other characters and situations that help define who they are. We will pay close attention to these secondary characters as well be they represented by other humans, or by nature, societal, spiritual or even aspects inside the main character themselves. We must endeavor to understand their unique qualities, agendas and wants. Again, clashing wants and needs are the source of inner conflict; the lifeblood of any dramatic tale.

Inevitably, structure and plot will grow from those internal wants and needs and how they interact with the obstacles created by secondary conflict, be they human or otherwise. The key will be to maintain the authenticity of your character’s true nature; plot, in this course, will grow solely from character want and need and will not be distorted by genre or outside coincidence or *deus ex machina*.

**Topics and methodology:**

The course is designed to use group discussion and critique, some review of film and screenplays, individual readings of student's work, class discussion and critique.

Students are expected to participate in all discussions and to help their fellow students develop their material. As professionals, writers are often called upon to work on their feet and this classroom will be used as a training ground to hone this important skill.

**Requirements:**

All students must complete an entire first draft by the end of the semester. Assignments must be delivered on time. Students should be positive and involved in class discussions.

**Reading:**

“The Tools of Screenwriting,” by David Howard (selected pages assigned on an ad hoc basis).

“A Swim in a Pond in the Rain,” by George Saunders.

Produced screenplays. We will, as a group during the first class, make a list of what we believe are the best of character-driven screenplays we have seen and then we will narrow the list down to 5 screenplays to read and discuss over the course of the semester. Discussion of the first screenplay will be professor led. The following four screenplays' discussions will be led by students in teams of two.

**Grading:**

Grading will be dependent on depth and breadth of thought in assignment preparation as well as serious and constructive class participation. All assignments must be submitted on time. Students who cannot make a class must contact the professor by email before they miss the class. Students are allowed one excused absence without any effect on their grades. After that point, each time a student misses a class their grade will drop a grade point for each class missed. Exceptions to this rule are medical emergencies.

Students are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner as they prepare to work in the industry; all work delivered on time, neat, printed, well thought out. Effort is of critical importance in determining final grade.

This course demands hard work and collaboration and each student is expected to be involved in each and every discussion.

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%

**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.

**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 a (A-)). A third unexcused absence will result in your grade being lowered another full point (ex: B to a (B-)). Your grade will be lowered by one point for every absence after. Two late arrivals equates to one full absence.

In order for 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.

If you have an emergency and must miss class please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

**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

**Course Schedule:**

This is the general layout of the class, but weekly assignments and deadlines might be modified along the way. Students will be notified of changes in class. Please share your work with the entire class by Monday at noon so everyone can read in advance of Tuesday evening's class. You may continue work beyond the time of posting, but the class will only work on what was sent to the group by deadline.

Week 1 Discuss and grasp the idea of character want and character need. Present ideas you have for a feature or an idea for a main character that might lead to one. Each student will name their favorite character-driven film. We will create character questions in this class.

*Assignment for next class: Answer character questions created in class for your potential main character. Write about character want and need.*

Week 2 Discuss your answers to character questions. Are they consistent? Is your character taking on their own life? What are their obsessions, fears, desires? How might these qualities lead to the story's structure, conflict and potential resolutions?

*Assignment: Write a brief treatment of the idea you want to pursue. 3-5 pages.  
Read first screenplay. Professor assigned. Use the David Howard book as reference to certain concepts (this will be adhoc).*

Week 3 Discuss short treatments. What is the "internal character story" that is the emotional underpinning to the screenplay? What does the main character want, and who and what are stopping him/her/they from achieving it?

Professor led short discussion of the first screenplay.

*Assignment: Begin to outline the story, staying aware of the important characters who populate your script.  
Read second screenplay (team 1 prepares their presentation).*

Week 4 Discuss the nature of the developing character relationships. What are the important interactions with other people that define the main character's world? How can we better tell our character's story by using supporting characters in the screenplay?

Team 1 leads short discussion of the second screenplay.

*Assignment: Create at least 4 to 5 supporting characters or elements of conflict that are important to the main character's world. Describe who or what they are, and how they are important to the main character. What do these supporting characters or elements want out of their life or represent to the character? What are their goals or inherent obstacles? Do they compliment the main character or conflict with the main character's goals?*

*Continue outlining the story for presentation.  
Read third screenplay (team 2 prepares their presentation).*

- Week 5 Read and discuss the character relationships. Discuss the nature of the bond between the characters. Discuss and examine how a bond between characters can change.
- Team 2 leads a short discussion of the third screenplay.
- Assignment: Continue to prepare the story outline for presentation for next weeks class. Post a **beat sheet** that highlights each scene. Read fourth screenplay (team 3 prepares their presentation).*
- Week 6 Verbal class presentation of story outline and relationship developments. The student will receive story and character notes.
- Team 3 leads a short discussion of the fourth screenplay.
- Assignment: Revise and rewrite the outline as per the class notes for delivery by the next class. When signed off by the instructor, begin writing the first sequences, pages 1-15. Read fifth screenplay (team 4 prepares their presentation).*
- Week 7 Read and discuss the pages looking to clarifying and simplifying the character story and plot problems. Focusing on establishing the main characters and the world of the story.
- Team 4 leads a short discussion of the fifth screenplay.
- Assignment: Write the second sequence, pages 15-30. Read pages 1-30 of A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*
- Week 8 Read and discuss the pages. The discussion will focus on a discussion of the supporting characters and the beginning of character relationships.
- Assignment: Write the third sequences, approximately pages 30-45. All major character relationships should be planted and beginning to be developed. Read pages 31-60 in ASIAPITR.*
- Week 9 Discuss the use of subplots in building a solid and meaningful second act. Explain the use of character relationships to expand and add dimension to the main character's internal issues.
- Assignment: Write the fourth sequence, approximately pages 45-60. Read pages 65-83 in ASIAPITR.*

- Week 10 Read and discuss the pages. Clarify the main character's want and goal that will drive the second act. Discuss the mid-point plot turn.
- Assignment: Write the fifth sequence, approximately pages 60-75.  
Read pages 84-117 in ASIAPITR..*
- Week 11 Read and discuss the pages. Discuss the major relationship with the significant other in the screenplay. At this point in the screenplay, the major relationships should be well developed and a major focus of the subplots.
- Assignment: Write the sixth sequence, approximately pages 75-90.  
Read pages 121-164 in ASIAPITR.*
- Week 12 Read and discuss the pages. The main character should be close to achieving their goal, but finds the complications of the story through well drawn relationships and subplots thwarting their way.
- Assignment: Write the seventh/eighth sequence, approximately pages 90-105.  
Read pages 167-216 in ASIAPITR.*
- Week 13 Read and discuss the pages. Discuss and examine the raising of stakes and the build up of rising tension as we enter the third act. Major character relationships and subplots should be resolving by this point in the screenplay.
- Assignment: Review notes and do a revision focusing on the main character's emotional arc and the major character relationships.  
Read pages 217-247 in ASIAPITR.*
- Week 14 Read and discuss final pages.
- SCRIPTS ARE DUE TUESDAY, DECEMBER 3<sup>rd</sup>.**
- Week 15 **STUDY WEEK -- NO CLASS**
- Read all final screenplays.  
Finish reading ASIAPITR.  
Evaluate and discuss each students work.  
Discuss the progress and the areas that each student needs to focus on in their revision.  
Students will be given polish notes, such as character consistency, dialogue, character relationships clarification, wants and needs clarifications, structural fixes.

#####

### ***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](http://Native-Land.ca) to discover the Original People of your home.

### **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](mailto: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://eotix.usc.edu/get-help/what-are-my-choices-text/>

### **SCA Office of Student Services**

213-740-8358 or [StudentAffairs@cinema.usc.edu](mailto: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](http://scacommunity.usc.edu)

### **Creative Technology and Support**

(213) 821-4571

[creativetech@cinema.usc.edu](mailto: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](mailto:spo@cinema.usc.edu).

### **Office of Industry Relations**

School of Cinematic Arts - SCA 235

(213) 740-4432

[ir@cinema.usc.edu](mailto: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](http://osas.usc.edu). You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at [osasfrontdesk@usc.edu](mailto: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](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.

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