

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.

Course ID and Title: CTWR 409 “Fundamentals of Screenwriting: Character, Conflict, and Story”

Units: 4

Term—Day—Time: Monday: 10:00 - 12:50 pm

[Important: The general expectation for a standard format course offered in a standard 15-week term is that the number of 50-minute contact hours per week should equal the number of semester units indicated and that one semester unit entails 1 hour of class time and 2 hours of outside work (3 hours total) per week. Standard fall and spring sessions (001) require a final summative experience during the University scheduled final exam day and time. Please refer to the Curriculum Office [Resources](#) page to find guidelines for courses that do not follow a standard format and/or a standard term.]

Location: SCA 216

Link to Course Brightspace: brightspace.usc.edu/d2l/home/124667

Instructor: David Ross

Office:Office Hours: By email appointment/Zoom

Contact Info: Rossi8000@mac.com

Course Description

As an introductory course for non-majors, “Fundamentals of Screenwriting” is a foundational course that focuses on the craft of storytelling. Concentration will be on discovering your creative voice, the mechanics of scene work, creating compelling characters, and understanding the 3-act structure of feature films.

Through scene study, character work, and story development students will learn the tools of crafting professional material for the screen. The culmination of the course will be the first act of a feature screenplay (25-30 pages).

Learning Objectives

To learn the professional approach of writing relatable characters, in conflict driven scenes, with an authentic voice. In addition, students will learn 3-act structure and how to create a compelling world. The culmination of this class will be a feature film outline and the first act of the script.

Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required

Computer and an internet connection. If unable to bring a laptop to class be prepared to bring printed pages.

Link information for the [USC Computing Center Laptop Loaner Program](#). Link information for software support and availability. USC Technology Support Links [Zoom information for students](#), [Brightspace help for students](#), [Software available to USC Campus.](#)]

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

Book:

The Tools of Screenwriting by David Howard and Edward Mabley
Save the Cat by Blake Snyder

Optional Readings and Supplementary Materials

[Optional course materials that are not required but recommended.]

Screenplays (recommended):

“Barbie” by Greta Gerwig & Noah Baumbach
“Little Miss Sunshine” by Michael Arndt
“Everything Everywhere All at Once,” by Daniel Kwan & Daniel Scheinert
“Parasite” by Bong Joon Ho and Han Jin-won
“The Babadook” by Jennifer Kent
“Nightcrawler” by Dan Gilroy
“Michael Clayton” by Tony Gilroy
“Barbarian” by Zach Cregger
“Get Out,” “Us,” “Nope,” by Jordan Peele
“Moonlight” by Barry Jenkins
“Booksmart” by Sarah Haskins
“Aliens” by James Cameron

Additional scripts as assigned by instructor*

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

Participation is a significant portion of your grade. This means actively contributing to class discussions and providing constructive feedback to each other. Workshopping ideas as a class is part of the learning and writing process. We will discuss best practices for giving and receiving notes.

If you need an accommodation or are unable to participate in verbal discussions, just let me know ahead of time and we’ll arrange an alternate method.

Grading Breakdown

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

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

Assignment Submission Policy

Assignments will either be due by 11:59pm the Thursday before class, or 9:00am the morning of class, depending on the assignment. I will let you know ahead of time what the due date is. This gives everyone time to read and consider the work we’ll be discussing in class.

Students will submit through the class Google Docs folder.

Attendance

WRITING DIVISION ATTENDANCE POLICY

Students are expected to be on time, prepared for each class, and meet professional standards. CTWR 513 only 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

Classroom norms

Part of this class involves giving constructive feedback on creative work which may be of a personal nature. It's on us to deliver feedback respectfully and professionally. It is also on us to receive feedback in a courteous manner. Disagreements are healthy and part of the process, but we will maintain civility. We'll discuss early on strategies for giving and receiving notes in a constructive way.

Students are expected to be consciously present for their classmates. No looking at outside work on phones or laptops when someone else's project is being discussed.

Zoom etiquette

During Zoom Workshop Classes

- Keep yourself muted unless called on.
- If your camera is on, please dress as you would in the classroom, and behave as you would in a professional environment.

Academic Integrity

The University of Southern California is foremost a learning community committed to fostering successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Academic misconduct is in contrast to the university's mission to educate students through a broad array of first-rank academic, professional, and extracurricular programs and includes any act of dishonesty in the submission of academic work (either in draft or final form).

This course will follow the expectations for academic integrity as stated in the [USC Student Handbook](#). All students are expected to submit assignments that are original work and prepared specifically for the course/section in this academic term. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s). Students suspected of engaging in academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Other violations of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), 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 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](#).

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.

Course Content Distribution and Synchronous Session Recordings Policies

USC has policies that prohibit recording and distribution of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment.

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

[Course evaluation occurs at the end of the semester university wide. It is an important review of students' experience in the class. The process and intent of the end-of-semester evaluation should be provided. In addition, a [mid-semester evaluation](#) is recommended practice for early course correction.]

Course Schedule

[Please note that all assignments are subject to change at the discretion of the professor.]

Week 1:

Introduction to Course / Principles of Screenwriting / Finding Unique Characters.

-Robert Cohen's G.O.T.E. as a screenwriting tool.

-Screening: "Little Miss Sunshine," "Nightcrawler"

-Assigned Viewing / Reading: "Quiz Lady" by Jen D'Angelo for next class

-Assignment #1: Write a character introduction scene that shows us who the protagonist is through action. 3 – 5 pages. (5%)

-Ongoing Assignment: Each student will keep an organized "Development Notebook" in which they collect and refine ideas for the culminating project. I'll be checking them randomly throughout the semester, so make sure your notes are presented in a way that I can understand. You may keep a physical or digital notebook, but you must be prepared to share it with me upon request during class.

Week 2:

NO CLASS. You should be thinking about your culminating project and beginning your Development Notebook. 15 weeks goes by quickly!

Week 3:

Workshop Character Introduction Scenes.

Discuss how to create conflict from the wants and needs of characters as seen in Quiz Lady and in our own scenes.

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

Week 4:

Workshop scenes of Direct Conflict.

-Discuss 3-Act Structure in screenwriting, citing examples from Quiz Lady

-Assignment #3: Create a simple Beat Sheet for an existing feature film. Be prepared to present the Act Breaks and main beats in next class as though we're in a development meeting (don't worry, we'll talk about what this looks like).

Week 5:

Continue discussion of 3-Act Structure.

-A few of us will present the Act Breaks and basic beats to the class.

-Discuss use of Planting and Payoff in screenwriting- How and just as importantly Why is it a useful tool?

-TIME PERMITTING: Screening of Scenes: "Us" and / or Parasite. If we don't have time I'll provide a short list of scenes to watch at home.

-Assignment #4: Write 2 scenes utilizing planting (1) and payoff (2). (5%)

Week 6:

Discuss Creating unique dialog with authenticity. Dialog as a storytelling tool.

-Viewing: "It Follows," "Barbarian," "Booksmart," "Pulp Fiction.

- Assignment #5: Write a scene with "authentic" dialog which effectively plants backstory, features conflict between characters, results in a narrative change, and is fun to listen to (whew, that's a lot!) (5%)

Week 7: Workshop and read Dialog Scenes.

- We'll look at whether a character is convinced of something new, what decisions they make during or as a result of your scene.

- For next class: Be prepared to pitch your idea for your culminating project.

Week 8:

- "Soft Pitch" and Workshop culminating projects with the class. You'll tell us your idea, we'll ask helpful questions. Everyone will get a turn so we will need to hit the ground running today.

- Assignment #6: Choose a character you would like to write a feature film script about. Create a 2-page bio and Robert Cohen GOTE sheet of that character. Can be a character used in previous scene work or new.

Week 9: Review of Character Bio

Discuss how a story comes out of character. Discuss how to create synopsis and outline for a feature film story.

Assignment #7: Write a one page bio and GOTE sheets of two important people in your main character's life. Be specific of their influence on the protagonist and points of conflict.

- Assignment #8: Write a one page, three-act synopsis of your story.

- Research: Watch assigned films from instructor.

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

Week 10: Workshop Synopsis

Discuss elaboration of conflict in story, subplots and structuring the big dramatic beats.

- Assignment #9: Write Outline, due the Thursday before Week 14's class.

Week 11: TBA, depending on progress toward our culminating projects.

Week 12: NO CLASS. Use this time wisely! You should be working on your outline and writing or preparing to write Act One pages.

Week 13: Workshop Outlines

- Review fundamental tools from before the recess as necessary. At this point, the Workshop will be divided into two groups, A & B.

- Assignment #10: Write first 5 pages of Act One, due Thursday before next class. You may also continue to revise your outline until the final week of class and I will grade accordingly.

- Group A will present pages next class. Group B will provide concise written notes / questions for Group A's pages.

- Development Notebooks will be turned in for final review at the beginning of next class.

Week 14: Workshop First Act pages

- Group A: Workshop first 5 pages.

- Group B: Provide written notes for Group A Pages. Keep writing (Individual Notes from Instructor)

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

- All students turn in Development Notebooks for final review. (5%)

Week : 15 Workshop First Act pages

Group A: Provide written notes for Group B Pages. Keep Writing

Group B: Workshop the first 10– 20 pages of Act One

Finals Week: Act One of Feature Script Due (25%)

You did it! We did it!

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/eootix.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