



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

CTWR 490 Fundamentals of Screenwriting
Session 001, Section 19419
Spring 2024

Class Schedule: Tuesdays, 4:00 – 6:50 PM

Location: SCA 362

Instructor: Rob Edwards

Office: Via Calendly <https://calendly.com/rob-edwards-iv/office-hours-rob-edwards-usc-ctwr-409>

Office Hours: Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays (check app for specific times.)

Contact Info: robedwar@usc.edu. Replies within 48 hours.

Course Goals:

- To develop your skills of observation; to discover how use of memory and experience can help make your characters and stories more compelling.
- To acquire a professional style of writing in the screenplay format.
- To understand the structure and *economy* of effective narrative screenwriting.
- To develop a fundamental understanding of the dramatic scene.
- To learn to write from a visual and aural perspective.
- To develop a writer's "voice."

Course Overview:

This is an introductory course for non-majors, where you will learn to develop your imagination and put compelling cinematic narratives on the page. The class will take place in a workshop setting; through weekly assignments, you will learn to see and hear your film as you write it. You will also discover the importance of exploring character through situations of conflict.

By the middle of the semester, you will choose a story to develop as a feature screenplay, writing a scene-by-scene outline and the first act of the screenplay (around 30 pages). Pro tip: *Start keeping a list of potential feature ideas from the first weeks of class!*

Screenwriting format is not an exact science; within accepted parameters. To this end, you will read as many professional screenplays as possible, and you'll report to the class on at least one of them. By the third session I expect your assignments to be written in a professional format. Assignments not meeting that standard will be returned unread.

Instructor Philosophy:

When you have interesting and inspirational stories to tell, you have an obligation to share them with the world. Given that, all good art contains a balance of heart, head, and hand. The hand is the craft that you put into your work, and I will do my very best to teach you the craft as I understand it. The “head” are the new ideas you’ll bring to make your stories original and entertaining. The “heart” is what’s inside of you. The more heart you put into your work, the more it will resonate with and move your audience. In this class, we will endeavor to find (or refine) your unique voice as a writer and filmmaker. Nothing will make me more satisfied than seeing you effectively tell the story you want to tell in the way you want to tell it.

The thorny word in that sentence is “effectively.” You may have built an amazing world in your head that you’ve populated with nuanced characters you know audiences will love forever. But if you can’t communicate that vision effectively—so it lives in the imaginations of others—it’s dead as soon as it hits the gatekeeper’s desk. It’s not enough to speak (or write) your unique and special voice, you need others to hear it through every word you put on the page.

So, in this class, you have two equally important roles:

One as **writer**, writing and revising your assignments and meeting deadlines.

And two, as **reader/listener**. When your classmates send out their pages, your job is to receive, digest, and offer constructive feedback. I’ve learned from some of the best note givers at Pixar and I’ll share what I learned at the Pixar Braintrust with you.

There’s an art to giving constructive feedback. Ed Catmull, the former President of Pixar, said that movies are terrible until the very last minute. As surgeons of story, our job is to step into the mind of the writer to assess their intent, figure out why they were not able to achieve their objective and then pinpoint the changes they’ll need to make moving forward. If you’re trying to make a different movie, it’s not constructive. If you’re trying to fix something that’s not broken, it’s not constructive. If you’re solving a problem in a way that doesn’t make the movie better, it’s the definition of not constructive. So, yes, both the giver and the taker of the notes will learn from each interaction. Don’t worry if you’re not great on the first day, you’ll get there. But, we don’t get better at the things we don’t do. So be ready to give good notes in every class quickly and efficiently so that everybody can share in the fun.

Great writing is equal parts math and psychology. I’m a strong advocate for “story math”, and you’ll find out how good structure makes your stories clearer and easier to read. The honesty and depth you bring to your material will require a mix of honesty and vulnerability. No one expects anyone to strike gold on the first day, but you have to dig for it to find it. As a class, we’ll do our best to encourage this process and make it easy for each other.

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the internet.

Recommended Reading

[The Tools of Screenwriting](#) by David Howard and Edward Mabley.

[Your Screenplay Sucks! 100 Ways to Make it Great](#) by William M. Akers. Great practical advice on everything from format to dialogue.

[The Writers Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers](#) by Christopher Vogler

Professional feature screenplays and pilot scripts, chosen by you or provided by the instructor.

Recommended Viewing

Throughout the semester, I'll be referring to several films as examples of various elements of storytelling. Here is a list of the movies I've written as well as a few others.

The Princess and the Frog (2009, screenplay by Ron Clements, John Musker and Rob Edwards)

Treasure Planet (2002, screenplay by Ron Clements, John Musker, and Rob Edwards)

Top Gun (1986, written by Jim Cash & Jack Epps Jr) *

Star Wars (A New Hope) (1977, written by George Lucas) *

Die Hard (1988, screenplay by Jeb Stewart and Steven E. de Souza) *

"The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air" Episodes S1:E1, S1:E13, S1:E23

I've also included a few films that I tend to refer to less frequently. Feel free to watch them at your leisure.

Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981, screenplay by Lawrence Kasdan, story by George Lucas and Philip Kaufman)

Tootsie (1982, screenplay by Larry Gelbart and Murray Schisgal)

Little Miss Sunshine (2006, written by Michael Arndt)

Jojo Rabbit (2019, written by Christine Leunens and Taika Waititi)

Booksmart (2019, written by Emily Halpern & Sarah Haskins and Susanna Fogel and Katie Silberman)

Course Notes

All written assignments will be due by **11:59 PM on the Sundays preceding our Tuesday classes**. This is to give you time to write while still giving you a generous amount of time to read and formulate notes. Your classmates and I are not obliged to read or offer comments on any work submitted after the deadline. It is by our discretion only. All assignments must be submitted to your Google Drive folder in PDF format. I will send an email with the link to the folder after the first class.

In advance of our classes, *you must read everyone's submitted work* (unless the weekly assignment specifies otherwise) and come prepared with your written notes, ready to discuss each other's work. At the beginning of class, I will announce the order in which we will be discussing everyone's work (usually in the order turned in according to the time stamp in Google Drive.)

I strongly advise using Grammarly to flag typos before you submit your material. Assignments will be penalized for grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, format mistakes, and typos.

To avoid getting a bunch of files named "My Stuff.PDF" or "Rob's Class.PDF," PDF files will use the following format: *YY.MM.DD-CTWR409-YOUR NAME-DRAFT INFO.pdf*. Example "24.01.08-CTWR409-Edwards-ActOne.pdf" or "24.01.08-CTWR409-DateStory-Draft1.pdf."

Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required

Final Draft is the industry standard. You can use other software; just make sure to proofread your PDFs to avoid the typos that often come with alternative apps. Free versions of most products are available at the [USC Computing Center Laptop Loaner Program](#). Link information for software support and availability. USC Technology Support Links [Zoom information for students](#), [Blackboard help for students](#), [Software available to USC Campus.](#)]

Description and Assessment of Assignments

I do not grade on content. I evaluate based on the degree to which you master the concepts that I teach in class. If you've written a perfectly structured and heartfelt blockbuster about a subject that only you and your dog care about, you'll be in better shape than a classmate who's written a meaningless, formless glob about the most important subject in the world.

Table 3 Course schedule

	Topics/Daily Activities	Readings/Preparation	Deliverables
Week 1 August 27	Course Introduction / Discuss elements used in storytelling.	Prepare to tell a short (3 minute or less) biographical story that would introduce your character in a movie.	Set up your Google Drive folder and post your "childhood memory story" in prose (5%) (on PDF to Google Drive by Sunday at 11:59 PM) Filename format: "24.09.01- CTWR409-Yourname- Memory.PDF"
Week 2 September 3	LECTURE: Character is story and story is character. 3-Minute Biographical Stories.		1) Email one or two paragraphs introducing yourself to the instructor. Anything you think I should know. This will be kept in confidence. 2) Write a short 2-page outline of a sequel to a film produced within the last 10 years (subject to my approval) and post it as a PDF to Google Drive by Sunday at 11:59 PM. NOTE: This will be the standard method of submitting unless otherwise indicated.
Week 3 September 10	LECTURE: The basics of story. Discuss your classmates' stories in class.	Read your classmates' material and make notes before class. Rehearse your remarks to make sure your contributions are clear and concise.	"Wrongest Person" exercise. Write a 3-5 page scene with 2 characters where Character A prepares a location for Character B's arrival but Character C shows up instead. This should be, from what we know of character A and his/her plans, the absolute worst person who could arrive. Character A must get rid of character C before he/she crosses paths with character B! But, character A cannot come out and say exactly why character C must leave. For this to work, the audience must know what is being planned and the stakes involved. (But this <u>cannot</u> be conveyed via dialogue on the phone, answering machine, texted etc.)

Week 4 September 17	LECTURE: Introduction to blockbuster screenplay structure. LECTURE: Pitching tips and tricks. Discuss your classmates' scenes in class.	Read your classmates' material and make notes before class.	Prepare to pitch three ideas for your feature screenplay. Keep your pitches simple. A character with a drive and an obstacle. Keep your pitches short (3 minutes) to give the class time to give you feedback. Read pages 21-39, "Basic Storytelling," from <i>Tools of Screenwriting</i> .
Week 5 September 24	LECTURE: How to give notes. How to take notes. Pitch 3 ideas, discuss with class: major characters, goals and obstacles. Decide on one to develop as a feature.	Read your classmates' material and make notes before class.	Write a "one-liner" and a three-page synopsis for your story. Keep in mind the things we've learned in class. Remember, "Be wrong as early as possible." – Andrew Stanton
Week 6 October 1	Discuss three-page synopsis. What elements are working? Which are problematic?	Class discussion.	Begin feature outlines.
Week 7 October 8	LECTURE: Outline tips and tricks.	Read outlines. Prepare to discuss in class.	Make revisions based on notes. Remember to leave yourself open to gaining inspiration from notes given to projects that are not yours.
Week 8 October 15	More discussion.	NOTE: I might split the class into sections to give discussion more time. Be ready, even if it's not your week.	You can do this! Pace yourself. "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."
Week 9 October 22	There's no such thing as too much discussion.		Keep your head down. As Tiana would say, "You're almost there."
October 29	LECTURE: Review what is an Act One? More discussion.		
Week 10 November 5 (VOTE!)	More discussion.		

Week 11 November 12	LECTURE: Tips and tricks for writing feature length screenplays.		Turn in Draft One of Act One of your screenplay by Sunday at 11:59 PM.
Week 12 November 19	Discus Act Ones.		
Week 13 November 26	REVIEW: Review the screenwriting concepts that we've learned in class. Discus feature scripts. Make plans for future rewrites.		NOTE: Final drafts of outlines and First Acts are due on Friday December 6th.
FINAL: Week 14 December 3	LAST DAY OF CLASS:		You survived. Turn in all work and your plan for next draft to Google Draft folder: FINAL DUE December 6th

Participation

The Pixar Braintrust works on a "Yes, and..." format. Make suggestions and add to previous suggestions when possible. I expect conversations to be lively and fun. I also keep track of who talks and for how long. Also, if their ideas are new and relevant or rehashes of things that other students have already said. The best way to show me that you understand the concepts is to apply them to help fix your fellow student's work in class.

Grading Breakdown

Grades are based on:

Assessment Tool (assignments)	% of Grade
Classroom participation	15%
Written assignments (weeks 1-4)	20%
Feature Outline	25%
Completed Act One	40%
TOTAL	100%

Grading Scale

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

Course Grading Scale

Letter grade	Corresponding numerical point range
A	94-100
A-	90-93
B+	87-89
B	83-86
B-	80-83

C+	77-79
C	73-76
C-	70-72
D+	67-69
D	63-66
D-	60-62
F	59 and below

Grading Timeline

I generally give mid-course feedback to students in need unless I've given feedback during a Zoom Office Hour. You can also grab me after class. I'm a captive audience until I get to my car.

Laptop, Cell Phone, and iPad Policy:

Our goal in class is to have everyone mentally present and one-hundred percent engaged during all discussions. To this end, only the person whose work is being discussed may have an open laptop for the purpose of referring to their material. All other laptops must be closed. Please print out or handwrite your notes on your classmates' work so you may refer to them in class. And please wait until class time to share your notes, so everyone may benefit from your insights, and every idea feels fresh and inspires both the receiver and others in the room.

If you must use an iPad (or similar device) for note-taking, make sure to have it on focus mode so that you are not distracted by text messages or similar pop-ups. Please remember to keep the tone of discussion collaborative, generous, and noncompetitive. The safer everyone feels in discussion, the more likely you will all be to explore and express your creative convictions.

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the Internet.

WRITING DIVISION ATTENDANCE POLICY

Students are expected to be on time, prepared for each class, and meet professional standards. CTWR 409 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 for 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 coursework.

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.

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 the 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).

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 accommodations are 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 powerbased 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.