USCSchool
of Cinematic Arts

The John Wells Division of Writing for Screen and Television

CTWR 409
Fundamentals of Screenwriting
Spring 2025 -- Fridays -- Time: 10 am to 12:50 pm

Units: 4
Location: SCA 363

Instructor: Maggie Bandur
E-mail: bandur@usc.edu
Office hours: By appointment, in person or via Zoom

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Introduction to writing compelling scenes, creating authentic characters, three-act structure and feature film outlining.

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 learn to write from a visual and aural perspective.

- To develop a fundamental understanding of the dramatic scene.

- To understand the structure of effective narrative as it applies to long-form screenwriting.

- To develop your writer's "voice."

PLAN:

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 a series of weekly assignments, you will learn to bring visual and aural senses

to your writing, to see and hear your film as you write it. And you will 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 30-minute screenplay, writing an outline and a first draft.

Screenwriting format is not an exact science; within accepted parameters, you should develop a style that you find both comfortable and expressive. To this end you will read as many professional screenplays as possible, reporting to the class on 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.

SUGGESTED COURSE READING:

Professional feature screenplays and pilot scripts, chosen by you or provided by the instructor. Other recommended books and reading will be shared as we go.

Watching the movies and pilots we discuss in their entirety is also highly recommended.

TECHNOLOGICAL PROFICIENCY/SOFTWARE:

Students will need access to Final Draft or an equivalent screenwriting program.

GRADING CRITERIA:

Your grade will be based upon fulfillment of the weekly scene-writing assignments (40%. 20% of which will be your rewriting assignment), story outline assignments (20%), the quality of your final short screenplay (30%), and your participation in class (10%).

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.

LAPTOPS, PHONES AND NOTETAKING:

You should bring your laptop with you for class, but unless in active use (e.g. taking notes, reading and critiquing work), it should be closed. Absolutely no cell phones are allowed. Please, also bring an analog way to take notes should your classmates abuse their digital privileges.

Often notes will be delivered verbally. It is your responsibility to write down these notes, as is industry standard.

PRIVACY AND INTERNET POLICY:

No one may record any part of the class -- or any person in the State of California -- without permission.

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 be on time and prepared for each class.

On the third absence, students will have their final grade lowered by 10% and an additional 10% for each absence thereafter. Two late arrivals equates to one full absence.

Note: This is a change in policy. Instructors will no longer distinguish between an excused or unexcused absence. An absence will be an absence.

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/or know you will miss class please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

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.

ASSIGNMENTS:

All assignments will be due **via email or in the Google Drive by Wednesday evening** so I can read and give you notes by class time. (But any time I can give you extra time I will.

Your full script draft will be due Finals Week, date TBD.

There will be a deduction of a half grade step for all work turned in late unless cleared with me before the due date.

COURSE EVALUATIONS:

Course evaluation occurs at the end of the semester university wide. It is an important review of students' experience in the class.

THIS SCHEDULE AND SYLLABUS ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE.

CTWR 409 WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Week 1 (1/17):   *Introduction to screenwriting*
Discuss the elements that can be used in telling your stories on the screen. Not just dialogue!
I**n-class assignment:** "Trip to School."
• List the places you went to school.
• List how you got to each school. Pick which place/trip is the hottest emotionally.
• List things, places, activities, people, clothes connected with that trip.
• Now describe one trip to the class, tell us how you got to school. *More "telling", less "reading!"*

For next class:

1)   *Read pages from selected screenplay or TV pilot.*

2)   *Atmosphere assignment: A person walks through the same surroundings(interior or exterior) three times. The first time we get the feeling we are in a horror film, the second time a romance, the third time a comedy.*

Write in screenplay form as best you can, with slug-lines, etc. We will discuss format in more depth next session.

Week 2 (1/24):   *Topic: Screenplay format*

1)   Discuss selected screenplay or TV pilot. How would you describe the writer's voice? What details do they emphasize? How do they describe locations, action? How do they use dialogue?

2)   Read atmosphere assignments out loud to class. Could the details,

description be improved, have more narrative flow? Where you able to capture the character of the location (*spiritus loci)*?

For next class:

"Roommates" assignment**.**
Describe a place where two people live, i.e. an apartment, combat bunker, prison cell or yes, even college dorm room.
In the first scene, the pair is living in harmony.
In the second scene there has just been a fight (conflict) between the two roommates,
In the third scene, one of the roommates has moved out.

The tricky part is there are no people in any of the scenes; we only know who they are by the furnishings, props or costumes they've left (i.e. a half-filled wine glass, a scarf, a collection of vinyl blues records, a set of nunchucks, etc.) Be specific!

Write in screenplay form. Don't just list facts, guide us through the narrative, with visuals *and* sound (i.e. dripping faucets, crackling fireplace, rain on the windows). There should be a sense of discovery for the audience: we should be able to figure out from the description who these people are, who started the fight, what it was about, who moved out, etc.

Week 3 (1/31):   ***Topic: Telling your story without dialogue***

Read and discuss "Roommates" assignments.
Do we know your characters and their conflict? Could you have chosen better and more evocative details with which to tell the story? Did you guide us effectively through the location?

For next class: "Preparation for a date" assignment:

Write two short non-dialogue scenes in screenplay format.

Pick an interesting character and place them in a significant location. (A home, an office, a hotel room, etc.) Show them preparing for some significant event, such as a crucial job interview, a murder, a confession, an encounter with aliens. The point is to reveal – through props and movement – not only a sense of the event, but how the character feels about what's about to happen. This should not be a guessing game. We are not given clues, but glimpses into the character's hopes and fears.

Then, ellipse time (we do not see the event itself) and show the character's return to the location. How do they feel? Did they succeed or fail with their mission? How have they been changed by what happened. Reveal through make-up (a bloody cut, a fresh tattoo), costume (a ripped shirt, a new tuxedo), props (they're now carrying a fishing pole, a box of doughnuts, a light saber). Be creative with your choice of details!

Week 4 (2/7): **Topic: Ellipsis, planting and pay-off**

Read and discuss "preparation for a date" scenes.

For next class: Direct conflict
Write a scene (or sequence) where two characters who can't stand each other are forced to work together on something they both feel passionately about.
One of them is the main character, the other the antagonist.
They could be working on something massive like the bridge in "Bridge Over the River Kwai," or something like intimate like finding a lost cat, like at the end of "Breakfast at Tiffany's." (3-5 pages)

Week 5 (2/14): **Topic: Dramatic scenes using dialogue.**

Read "Direct Conflict" scripts, discuss. How well did you understand your characters? What was the source of their animosity. Did either of them change by the end of the conflict? Did their relationship? Did you tell your story without relying exclusively on dialogue?

For next class: Seduction scene

One character tries to convince another character to do something. It does not have to be sex; it can be anything the other character wants but need to be indirect to get it. Dialogue will be important, but don't forget the other tools you've learned. What about their behavior or the situation might belie what they are saying in words.

Week 6 (2/21): **Topic: Indirect Conflict**

Read "Intruder" scene. Did the main character effectively, if covertly, try to get what they want? What surprising obstacles (twists) occurred to stop them from succeeding? How did they change as a character to cope with the new situation? I.E. an uptight person suddenly blasts the music and dances with the other character in order to distract them.

For next class: *Rewrite one of your previous assignments, making improvements in story structure, description, dialogue, etc.*

Week 7 (2/28):   ***Topic: The Power of Rewriting***

Read and discuss rewritten material. Is the story clearer, more impactful? Does the description "pop?" Is the dialogue sharper?

For next class:

Rewritten Scene due
Pitch story ideas in class

Week 8 (3/7):   ***Topic: Creating a long-form story***

Review three act structure.
Pitch your idea to the class and discuss. Which has the most potential for a half hour story? Who should be the main character? What is their want/need in the story?
Choose which story to develop.

For next class: *Write a "beat sheet" of your idea*

Week 9 (3/14)   ***Beat Sheets***
Workshop stories

For next class: *Write an outline for 30-page script*.

Week 10 (3/21)   Spring break

Week 11 (3/28)   ***Workshop Outlines***

Week 12 (4/4)   ***Workshop Outlines***

Week 13 (4/11)   ***Workshop Outlines/ Topic: Writing the long-form script***

For next week: Turn in first 10 pages of your script

Week 14 (4/18)   ***Workshop Pages***

For next week: The 10 pages of your script

Week 15 (4/25)   ***Workshop Pages***

For next week: The remaining pages

Week 16 (5/2)   ***Workshop Pages/Class review.***
                  Review screenwriting concepts, final discussion of feature scripts.   Plans for later rewrites.

                  For next week: Final draft of your 30 page script
                  DUE DATE TBD

Students with Disabilities:

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on disability is required to register with Disability Services Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP; please be sure this letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Telephone is (213) 740-0776.

<div align="center">

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems
</div>

Academic Conduct:
Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Support Systems:
Student Health Counseling Services - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call
engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling
Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.
Student Health Leave Coordinator – 213-821-4710
Located in the USC Support and Advocacy office, the Health Leave Coordinator processes requests for health leaves of absence and advocates for students taking such leaves when needed.
https://policy.usc.edu/student-health-leave-absence/
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call
suicidepreventionlifeline.org
Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call
engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) | Title IX - (213) 740-5086
equity.usc.edu, titleix.usc.edu
Information about how to get help or help a survivor of harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following protected characteristics: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations.

Bias Assessment Response and Support - (213) 740-2421
studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support
Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions for appropriate investigation and response.

The Office of Disability Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776
dsp.usc.edu
Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

USC Support and Advocacy - (213) 821-4710
studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa
Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101
diversity.usc.edu 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
dps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu
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) 442-120 – 24/7 on call
dps.usc.edu
Non-emergency assistance or information.

Diversity and Inclusion
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 person 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. You can also report discrimination based on a protected class here https://equity.usc.edu/harassment-or-discrimination/

Disruptive Student Behavior:
Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students' ability to learn and an instructor's ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.

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)

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