

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
Screenwriting 514B – Basic Dramatic Screenwriting
Spring 2025
(Two Units, Required, Section: 19233D)

Instructor: Don Bohlinger
Class Schedule: Tuesday 1-3:50
Class Location: SCA 345
Office Hours: Monday/Tuesday 11-1, SCA 354, or by appointment
Contact Information: dfb@usc.edu, 323 804-0110

COURSE GOALS:

- Further develop your ability to write feature screenplays
- Expand your understanding of character and character relationships
- Learn to write character biographies and a story outline
- Gain a deeper understanding of story structure
- Utilize and improve upon screenwriting techniques such as visualization and the dramatic scene
- Learn to write from a detailed outline
- Write a professional first draft (with revisions)

COURSE OBJECTIVE:

The objective of this course is to build on the skills you acquired in Screenwriting Fundamentals and Intermediate Screenwriting by completing a feature outline and a feature screenplay with some revisions. Whereas last semester you utilized your intuitive skills to write your first feature, this semester you will develop a more conscious, professional approach to screenwriting.

This does not mean formula. Since you will be immersed in the techniques of story structure in 516, the danger is to fall into a “paint by numbers” way of writing your scripts. Don't. While the skills you will acquire in 516 (Feature Script Analysis) are essential to your development as a film or television writer, it is crucial that you continue to utilize your memories and experiences to bring life and meaning to your characters and stories, whatever the genre. It is both your imagination and your technique that will separate you from the pack as a screenwriter.

We will slow down the process to concentrate on the very techniques you are learning in 516; we will focus on how those techniques can help you to tell your story more effectively.

Please keep in mind that this is a learning experience, not a thesis class, and that the emphasis will be on the process, not the product. If your outline and your screenplay turn out great that's a bonus, but our goal is for you to absorb the fundamentals of feature screenwriting and the methods by which you can put those fundamentals to use.

Since we will be emphasizing specific screenwriting methods, your work in 516 is closely related to our work in 514B. With that fact in mind, we will sometimes supplement our own discussion by talking about the films you are watching and the concepts you are learning in 516 and discuss how that knowledge can be helpful to your own writing.

We will begin with the ideation process, the time when the writer will explore the possibilities of his or her stories and characters. Students will be expected to pitch two feature ideas in the first two weeks. I would also like you to talk about your favorite feature film of the last year. I want to get a sense of your tastes as a screenwriter as quickly as possible.

Once you've chosen your story, we will move on to the work of creating compelling characters to bring this story to life. We will be writing biographies: creating histories for your characters, defining their motivations, hopes and fears. You will be challenged to make your characters fresh and original by using your own experience. At the same time you will also be organizing the general ideas of your story into a first person character description of his/her/their story.

The second stage of our class will be writing the step outline or treatment. Here your work will dovetail nicely with what you are learning in 516. Character and story structure will be discussed. We will discuss the way you tell the story. How is the character introduced? What is his/her defining scene? When is the tension clear? And what is the central question of the story? Then, what are the obstacles that frustrate your character in their journey? How do they find the courage to continue? Who is on their side and who is against them? What is their lowest point and what is their most brilliant moment in the story? Finally, how does your story resolve itself and what does that resolution have to say about your view of the world? In this part of the class, we will work sequence by sequence, presenting groups of scenes to the class. We will attempt to 'see' the movie in its entirety. This is our chance to make the story work: to play with the order of scenes, of revelation and recognition, of heightening the tension and making the resolution believable. At the end of this section of the class you will have written a 15 - 25 page step outline in which every scene in the movie is described.

Finally, you will write the first draft. First drafts should be written quickly and in a burst of enthusiasm and emotion. Use your outline to guide you, but let the story take you over. Let your characters speak and act. We will be reviewing the lessons of 513: how to tell a story visually, how to make your scenes rich with character, action and drama, how to make the dialogue surprising, clear and effective. Along the way you will be getting notes from your classmates; I expect you to address some of these notes along the way but (for bigger changes) in the two week revision that will be your final first draft. For

me, a *final* first draft is a draft you feel comfortable showing someone. Not a studio or an agent!!! But I am referring to a friend, a colleague or a classmate who knows nothing of the story and who can give you fresh input.

Your final portfolio will be: ten pages of character biographies with a main character narrative, a 15-20 page step outline, and the first draft (90-110 pages) of your script with a revision.

The class is a seminar, and you will be expected to read and give feedback on the material of your classmates. The collaborative process (the writer's table) is central to writing for film and television and is an integral part of the 514B experience.

I recognize that every writer's method is unique to them, and that you are in the process of developing your own method, if you haven't developed it already. However, in this class you will be following the approach and the timetable described below as this is the best way to teach you. Aside from weekly written and reading assignments, there are two major deadlines, and you're expected to meet them.

CLASS SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNMENTS:

Class 1: 1/14

- Discuss class expectations, deadlines and syllabus.
- First story ideas will be discussed. Why this movie? Why now? What is special about your character.
- Is your main character interesting/compelling? Why?
- Homework: character backstory, description of his/her/their need (reason the story is happening to them) and description of the story from the main character's perspective. Character narrative questions.
- 1-2 pages answering the following questions:
 - Who is your main character? Why are we interested in him/her? What is their mystery? Problem? Need?
 - What is their specific goal?
 - How do they develop that goal...? How does it grow out of their backstory and opening routine?
 - What is the world of your story? (Location, routine, etc.)
- Bring in two more ideas. Three-line pitches.

Class 2: 1/21

- Discuss Second ideas (if needed).
- Homework for second idea (if needed): character backstory, description of his/her/their need (reason the story is happening to them) and description of the story from the main character's perspective. Character narrative questions.
- Discuss character biography work.
- Screen some character defining scenes.

- Deepen character biography. Explore need. Past relationships. Status quo and problem that starts the story.
- Homework: pitch character introduction, describe main the character's routine
- Homework: one page description (1st person) of the character's want
- Homework: answer script/character questions (short version).
- Homework: antagonist biography (2 pages including backstory)
- Handout: sample step outline.
- Begin secondary and subplot character work. Why essential and important.

Week 3: 1/28

- Discuss secondary characters and the main character. Who is on the main character's side and who is against her.
- Discuss the main character's routine.
- Discuss the problem (upset to that routine) that starts the film. Inciting incident/point of attack.
- Discuss the moment the character "want" is clear. Or when the question of the film is clear.
- Homework: start outline – send first act outline to class for discussion.
- Homework: read your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments. (*Note: now all work must be emailed by 6PM Monday before the next class.)

Week 4: 2/4

- Discuss **first act step outline**.
- Discuss character introductions, defining scenes, world, routine, point of attack, development of want and a set up of the character's need.
- Do we empathize with the main character and their goal.
- Homework: rewrite existing outline putting in changes
- Homework: fourth and fifth sequence outline (to midpoint) are due.
- Homework: read your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments.

Week 5: 2/11

- Discuss **fourth and fifth sequences step outline to midpoint**.
- Discuss lock in, stakes, subplot, rising action, midpoint, conflict.
- Do we have ascending action, conflict and tension?
- Homework: write until the end of Act Two (fifth and sixth sequences)
- Homework: read your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments.

Week 6: 2/18

- Discuss **fifth and sixth sequences step outline to midpoint**.
- Do we have descending action and increasing tension. Is the character true? Is the subplot coming to a culmination. Is the end of act two a low point or high point for your character?
- Homework: Write the third act (7&8) of your script.

Week 7: 2/25

- **Discuss third act outline.** Did you find your theme? Did the character achieve their want or fulfill their need? Is it satisfying to the audience? Did you wrap up all subplots? Did you provide a twist to test your character's change?
- Homework: rewrite outline up to this point putting in changes and suggestions that work for you.
- Homework: write the first act of your screenplay (20-25 p.)
- Divide into groups A and B.
- Homework: read your fellow writers' first acts and be ready with comments.

Week 8: 3/4 (Group A)

- **Discuss first acts of screenplay.**
- Review dramatic scene writing. Make sure introductions and defining scenes are solid, need and want are clear.
- Homework: rewrite first acts (mark changes in final draft), write sequence three and four to midpoint.
- Homework: read your fellow writers' first acts and be ready with comments.

Week 9: 3/11 (Group B)

- **Discuss first acts of screenplay.**
- Review dramatic scene writing. Make sure introductions and defining scenes are solid, need and want are clear.
- Homework: rewrite first acts (mark changes in final draft), write sequence three and four to midpoint.
- Homework: read your fellow writers' first acts and be ready with comments.

Week 10: 3/18

- Spring Recess

Midterm: Submit your completed outlines 2/25 (15 pages)

Week 11: 3/25 (Group A)

- **Discuss sequences three and four to midpoint.**
- Is the lock in strong. Is tension clear and the conflict strong. Is there ascending action?
- Homework: write sequences four and five to end of act two.
- Homework: read your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments.

Midterm: Submit your completed outlines 3/5 (15-25 pages)

Week 12: 4/1 (Group B)

- **Discuss sequences three and four to midpoint.**
- Is the lock in strong. Is tension clear and the conflict strong. Is there ascending action?
- Homework: write sequences four and five to end of act two.

- Homework: read your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments

Week 13: 4/8 (Group A)

- **Discuss sequences five and six to end of act two.**
- Is there descending action. Is the low point clear, the crisis strong?
- Homework: write the third act (sequence seven and eight).
- Homework: read your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments.

Week 14: 4/15 (Group B)

- **Discuss sequences five and six to end of act two.**
- Is there descending action. Is the low point clear, the crisis strong?
- Homework: write the third act (sequence seven and eight).
- Homework: read your fellow writers' work and be ready with comments.

Week 15: 4/22 (Group A)

- **Discuss third acts.**
- Be prepared to talk about the plan you have for your revision which is the final for this class. (You will not be able to make all of the changes along the way, so you should keep a running list of things you will address during the two weeks before the final project is submitted on May 7th.)
- Homework: revise your script for final submission on May 14th

Week 16: 4/29 (Group B)

- **Discuss third acts.**
- Be prepared to talk about the plan you have for your revision which is the final for this class. (You will not be able to make all of the changes along the way, so you should keep a running list of things you will address during the two weeks before the final project is submitted on May 7th.)
- Homework: revise your script for final submission on May 14th

Last Class Day – May 2

May 14th – Final Scheduled, first draft of script (with revisions) is due.

EVALUATION CRITERIA:

CTWR 514B grades will be based on careful consideration in the following areas of the students' work:

1. The ability to keep up with the writing required in the course's schedule.
2. Demonstrated understanding of the fundamental principles of a good story: character, tension, and movement.
3. Demonstrated understanding of the fundamental principles of a good script: character, visualization, scene, dialogue.
4. The ability to develop a professional out line (midterm) and a feature script with revisions.

GRADING WEIGHTS:

CTWR 514B grades are based on:

Quality of writing:

Character Work	10%
Step Outline	25%
First Draft	40%
Revisions	15%
Workshop Prep	10%

Attendance is required. Tardiness will not be tolerated. The class is a workshop (writers' table) so you are expected to read and respond to your fellow writers' work.

LETTER GRADES:

91-100.... A	78-80....B-	65-67.....D+
88-90.....A-	75-77....C+	61-64.....D
85-87.....B+	71-74....C	58-60.....D-
81-84.....B	68-70....C	0-59.....F

Presentation:

As you are hoping to enter the film industry as professionals, I expect your work to be prepared in a professional manner. Screenplay formatting errors, typos, bad spelling or grammar and overall sloppiness are NOT ACCEPTABLE.

Writing Division Attendance Policy:

This class is a workshop and your participation in the discussion is important. Participation includes full involvement in, and contribution to, class discussion, as well as reading (in advance at times; see schedule) the assignments of your colleagues and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.

Class attendance is mandatory, and students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Tardiness is unprofessional and disrespectful to the class. Two late arrivals equal one full absence. Two unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered by a half grade point (Ex. A to A-) Any further unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered another two thirds of a point (ex: B to a C+) for each absence.

Excused absences can include, but are not limited to: illness, both physical and mental; death of a loved one; personal emergency; sporting events (for Student-Athletes) or other university-sponsored activities; religious holidays, and so on.

If you find you must miss class due to personal emergency or personal crisis, please contact your professor as soon as possible so they can assist you in finding the appropriate University care and guidance. Your health and well-being are of utmost importance to the Wells Writing Division and to your faculty.

In addition, due to current Covid protocols, if you are feeling ill, without time to test before class, please notify your instructor, do not attend class, and get a test. If you test positive, inform your instructor and quarantine for the Health Department's designated period of time.

Classroom Decorum

The professor expects all students to respect and support the ideas and writing of their fellow students. Writing is a fragile process and while we should ask questions, analyze and even challenge, we want to remain supportive, always keeping in mind that the screenplay is fragile work in progress. A working writer needs to develop the art of collaboration while working with their peers. As a working writer you will need to be able to work constructively with directors, producers and studio executives.

Laptop and Texting Policy

Students may use their laptops at the discretion of the professor. Laptops may be used for note taking, but not for surfing the web unless it is part of a class project. Texting is not allowed during class time. Texting is distracting and disruptive. There is nothing that needs to be communicated to anyone except your classmates during class time.

Save your texting and surfing until class break.

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.

The School of Cinematic Arts Support Systems and Statements

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Diversity and Inclusion are foundational to the SCA community. We are committed to fostering a welcoming and supportive environment where students of all identities and backgrounds can flourish. The classroom should be a space for open discussion of ideas and self-expression; however, SCA will not tolerate verbal or written abuse, threats, harassment, intimidation, or violence against persons or property. If students are concerned about these matters in the classroom setting, they are encouraged to contact their SCA Diversity and Inclusion Liaison, <http://cinema.usc.edu/about/diversity.cfm>; e-mail diversity@cinema.usc.edu or anonymously submit a report on SCA Community: <https://scacommunity.usc.edu/secure/diversityEquity/> You can also read more about how to report discrimination based on a protected class here: <https://eeotix.usc.edu/get-help/what-are-my-choices-text/>

SCA Office of Student Services
213-740-8358 or StudentAffairs@cinema.usc.edu

SCA Embedded Therapists
Students enrolled in an SCA major program can schedule an appointment with an embedded therapist for the School of Cinematic Arts through the student health portal [MySHR](#).

SCA Community
For additional SCA resources please visit scacommunity.usc.edu

[Creative Technology and Support](#)

(213) 821-4571

creativetech@cinema.usc.edu

Location: SCA 128

Support Hours: Monday - Friday, 8:30 AM - 8:30 PM

<https://knowledgebase.sca.usc.edu/>

<https://workstations.sca.usc.edu/>

Physical Production Office

The Physical Production Office assists students and faculty with production-related matters including production numbers, locations, permits, insurance, gear and equipment vendors, safety issues, and crew and actor policies. More information can be found by visiting the online [Production Procedures and Safety Handbook](#). The Physical Production Office is located at SCA 304 and is open every weekday from 9am-5pm (Fridays 9am-1pm). You can also reach the Office by calling 213-740-1298 or by email at spo@cinema.usc.edu.

Office of Industry Relations
School of Cinematic Arts - SCA 235
(213) 740-4432
ir@cinema.usc.edu

Cinematic Arts Library Research Guide
<https://libguides.usc.edu/cinema>

- Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

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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.

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.

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