

**School of Cinematic Arts**  
**The John Wells Division of Writing for Screen and Television**

**CTWR 523: “Introduction to the Screenplay”**  
**Spring 2025 – 4 units**

Instructor: Jody Wheeler  
Class Schedule: Monday 4-6:50pm  
Class Location: SCA 362  
Office Hours: By appointment  
Contact Information: josephw9@usc.edu

**Course Objective:**

Introduction to formal elements of the screenplay through lectures and the workshopping of a complete first draft of a feature-length script. Students will learn the steps to “build” a script from idea (spine, beat sheet, treatment, draft), culminating in the completion of a feature script.

**Course Description:**

Let’s write a script. Yup, it’s intimidating. Yup, it’s a great deal of work. Yup, it can drive you bonkers. That’s screenwriting! Over the next semester, we’ll learn how you can go from an idea for a film to a completed draft of a script. Or, as I like to put it, how 16 weeks to puke out a script. Trust me, it’ll be fun. Ish.

**Course Reading / Media:**

Book:

*The Tools of Screenwriting* by David Howard and Edward Mabley

*The Hollywood Standard - Third Edition: The Complete and Authoritative Guide to Script Format and Style*

*The Art of Dramatic Writing* by Lajos Egri

Optional:

*39 Steps To Better Screenwriting* by Paul Chitlik

Screenplays:

The Dark Place by Jody Wheeler

Others as assigned.

Movies:

Breathing (Atmen) (2011)

<https://www.kanopy.com/product/breathing-atmen>

The Dark Place (2014)

<https://www.amazon.com/Dark-Place-Blaise-Embry/dp/B00PFL8YEI>

Others as assigned.

**Grading Criteria:**

Assignments: 50%

Final Script: 30%

Participation: 20%

Your grade will be based upon fulfillment of the weekly assignments, the quality of your final screenplay, and your participation in class.

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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.

**Internet Policy:**

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

**Recording Devices:**

You may not record lectures or or workshops without the consent of the instructor.

**Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:**

Laptops may be used for the purpose of taking notes during workshop. Cell phones should not be used in the classroom.

## **BLOGGING, PODCASTING, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND RECORDING:**

Our class lectures and discussions are considered private communications. Not only will we all be sharing personal stories, but we'll be sharing intellectual property. Therefore, if you have a blog, or podcast, or post about your personal life on social media, anything covered in this class, including lecture material, is considered off limits when it comes to posting on your blog or social media accounts and when it comes to your podcast. And you are not permitted to record lectures or workshop sessions or any of our discussions.

### **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.

### **Writing Division Attendance Policy:**

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

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 equates to one full absence.

**NOTE:** Exceptions will be made in the case of religious holidays and DSP accommodations.

**NOTE:** CTWR 523 only meets once a week and attendance is a vital component for your success.

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](mailto:writing@cinema.usc.edu)

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.

Please be aware 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.

**COVID: Please follow all USC COVID Policies. If you suspect you are sick, do not come to class.**

**Class Schedule:**

Please note that all dates are subject to change at the discretion of the professor.

**Week 1 (1/13)**

Introductions

How to think about movies

Screenplay format

Shape of a Script (3 Acts / 7 point Spine)

Parts of a Scene

**For Next Class:**

**Read** “The Dark Place Script”

**Watch:** The Dark Place

**Text:**Tools, pg 1-22

*Bring in two story ideas for next class*

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**Week 2 (1/20)**

**No Class / MLK Day**

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**Week 3 (1/27):**

Understanding Premise

Discussion of “The Dark Place” Script

Share story ideas.

Decide Story You Want To Tell

**For Next Week:**

**Watch:** Atmen (2011)

**Read:** Character Bios From The Dark Place

**Write:** A biography / sketch of your protagonist and antagonist

**Write:** Write the premise for your story

**Text:** Dramatic Writing pg 1-31

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**Week 4 (2/3): Characters And Conflict**

Discuss "Atmen"

Story / Conflict

Biographies / Character Sketch

Read your character bios / sketches

Supporting Character

Dialogue

**For Next Week:**

**Write** the 7 point spine of your story

**Text:** Tools, 23-40 & Dramatic Writing, pg 32-59

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**Week 5 (2/10):**

Read and discuss your spines

Structure / Inciting Incidents / Beat Sheets

**For Next Week:**

**Read:** The Dark Place Beat Sheet

**Write:** the beat sheet for the First Act of *YOUR script*

**Text:** Dramatic Writing 59-86

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**Week 6: 2/17**

***President's Day***

***No Class***

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**Week 7 (2/24):**

Read And Discuss First Act Beat Sheets

**For Next Class:**

**Write:** Act Two and Act Three Beat Sheets

**Revise:** First Act Beat Sheet

**Text:** Dramatic Writing 59-125 & Tools 41-78

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**Week 8 (3/3):**

Read And Discuss Revised Beat Sheets

Discuss Treatments

**For Next Week:**

Revise Beat Sheets.

**Or**

Write Treatment For Your Script

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**Week 9 (3/10):**

Discuss Beat Sheets and Treatments

Discuss the First Ten Pages of a Script

**For Next Class:**

**Write:** First 10 pages of Script

**Read:** Remainder of Art of Dramatic Writing

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***Week 10 (3/11): Spring Break***

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**Week 11 (3/24):**

Read and Discuss First Ten Pages

**For Next Week**

Write the rest of Act One

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**Week 12 (3/31):**

Discuss pages

**For Next Week**

Write Act 2a

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**Week 13 (4/7)**

Read / Discuss Your Pages

**For Next Week:**

Write Act 2b

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**Week 14 (4/14):**

Read / Discuss Your Pages

**For Next Week**

Write Act 3

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**Week 15 (4/21):**

Discuss Pages

**For Next Week**

Keep Writing

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**Week 16 (4/28):**

Discuss pages

Keep Writing

**DUE FRIDAY MAY 9th**

**Final Script!**

## **Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**

### **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 Campus in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” [policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b](http://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in Campus and university policies on scientific misconduct, [policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

### **Support Systems:**

Student Health Counseling Services - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call  
[engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://equity.usc.edu),  
[titleix.usc.edu](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://dps.usc.edu), [emergency.usc.edu](http://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](http://dps.usc.edu)

Non-emergency assistance or information.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

[ombuds.usc.edu](http://ombuds.usc.edu)

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.

## **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](mailto: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.

### **PLEASE NOTE:**

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