

CTWR 409 – FUNDAMENTALS OF SCREENWRITING – SPRING 2025

Section: 19341

Mondays, 10 AM - 12:50 PM SCB 304

INSTRUCTOR – Scott Murphy

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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 learn to develop your creativity in generating story ideas suitable for motion pictures and television.
- To learn how to work collaboratively with other writers in a “writer’s room” setting.
- To become proficient in the currently accepted “professional style” of writing in the screenplay format.
- 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 develop stories that lend themselves to being told through the cinematic form. You will also discover the importance of exploring character through situations of conflict.

Over the course of this semester, you will create and develop a story for a 30-minute screenplay. You will complete 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.

SUGGESTED COURSE READING:

There are no required textbooks for this course. However, if you are looking for additional resources on screenwriting, here are some books that I have found to be helpful. Feel free to consult them to see if you find their advice to be useful to you:

Bird by Bird, by Ann Lamott. (Inspirational and practical advice for becoming a creative writer.)

The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writer's Guide to the Crafts and Elements of a Screenplay, by David Howard & Edward Mabley. (Introduces basics of dramatic structure and its application to feature screenplays.)

Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach by Paul Gulino. (This book is mostly geared toward writing feature-length screenplays, but the ideas about how to construct a narrative can be applied to short scripts, as well.)

There are SO MANY additional screenwriting books out there. I'll discuss some of the more popular ones in class.

Aside from books, it's arguably even MORE helpful to read actual, professionally written screenplays. (I can provide you with these when we get to that point in the semester.)

SOFTWARE:

While no textbooks are required for this class, you are strongly advised to acquire some kind of screenwriting software. It's theoretically possible to format screenplays, manually, by using any kind of word processing software. But having software that's specifically designed for screenwriting will make your life much easier.

The industry-standard screenwriting software is called Final Draft. You can purchase it on your own, OR, because you are USC students, you can use your student email to download a free trial of Final Draft, which will last for 22 weeks, which will be long enough for you to complete this course. You can download it at this link:

<https://www.finaldraft.com/edu-trial/>

There are also several other screenwriting programs out there, if you have another preference. Some of the popular brands include: Highland, Writer Duet, and Fade In.

PRESENTATION:

Written assignments should be uploaded to the appropriate discussion on Brightspace, before the start of class on the day when they are due. Assignments should be completed in PDF format. So, whichever writing or screenwriting software you use, be sure and convert your work into a PDF file before uploading it.

GRADING CRITERIA :

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

Attendance is mandatory. You are expected to be class on time. The policy of the Writing Division is that two absences will result in a lowering of your grade one full point, a third absence another point. Two late arrivals are treated as one absence.

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.

Class discussion is a big part of this class. Strive to not only present your material clearly and with confidence, but to also listen to your fellow writers and try to help them.

You have two overall goals in this class: 1.) To write the best script that you can write. 2.) To help your fellow writers write the best script they can write.

Learn to accept class notes, not as criticism, but as an attempt to give you helpful advice.

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.

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:

Laptops will be used in class, but only for reading and sharing written assignments. DO NOT surf the internet during class. I cannot tell you how much you should not do this. Stay focused on classwork while we're in class. The internet will still be there when we take a break and when class is done.

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.

Office Hours: Over Zoom or in person by appointment only.

CTWR 409 WEEKLY SCHEDULE

* NOTE: This is the departmental schedule for this course. We will likely make some adjustments as needed, especially since we will have several “days off” throughout the semester due to Federal Holidays. This is another reason why it’s important to attend class and stay in touch with each other, so you can remain up-to-date on when particular assignments are due. *

SESSION 1: ***Introduction to screenwriting***

Discuss the elements that can be used in telling your stories on the screen. Not just dialogue!

In-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.

SESSION 2: ***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? Were 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.

SESSION 3:

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!

SESSION 4: *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)

SESSION 5: *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: “Wrongest person/intruder” assignment.

Two characters. Length: 3 - 5 pages.

Character A prepares some location for character B's arrival, but character C - the worst person possible - shows up instead! 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. The audience must know what is being planned and the stakes involved. Also, character C must be entirely motivated to stay. (Mom is sick and took the day off, for example.) The scene ends when Character B arrives, whether Character A is successful in getting rid of character C, or not.

SESSION 6: ***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.*

SESSION 6: ***Topic: The Power of Rewriting***

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

Rewritten scene due: xxx

For next class: *Choose two characters from your previous scenes and put them in a situation of sustained conflict. What are their incompatible “wants?” Why is resolution between them seemingly impossible? Present two possible scenarios.*

.SESSION 7: ***Topic: Creating a long-form story***

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 three classes: *Write outline for 30-page script.*

SESSION 8-10: ***Topic: 3-act outline***

Read outlines. Workshop in class.

Completed outline due.

SESSION 11-14: ***Topic: Writing the long-form script***

Write 30-page screenplay.

Break class into two sections, A and B, workshop script pages on alternating weeks.

SESSION 15: ***Class review.***

*Review screenwriting concepts, final discussion of feature scripts.
Plans for later rewrites.*

Final draft of 30-page screenplay due Monday, 5/12/25 before 10am.

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.

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 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

11.

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

12.

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.

PLEASE NOTE:

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