

USC School of Cinematic Arts
Writing Division
CTWR 523: Introduction to the Screenplay
Section 19379
Tues 4-7pm, SCA 363
SPRING 2025
Professor: Siavash Farahani
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COURSE OVERVIEW:

This is an introductory course to writing the first draft of a full-length screenplay. Students will be guided through ideation, outlining and writing of a first draft. Emphasis will be placed on telling character driven narratives with well-structured plots to tell dramatically compelling stories. The central theme of the class is Frank Daniel's motto "a good story, well-told".

COURSE OBJECTIVE:

Developing a feature-length idea, both orally (class pitch) and in written form. Students will write a step outline, then write a feature screenplay to be completed by semester's end. Besides story elements, students are encouraged to understand why they are choosing to write their particular story. How does it speak to them, their intention or experience?

COURSE GOALS:

- Developing an idea into a feature screenplay outline, and a first draft.
- Creating unique characters with strong inner lives, complex relationships and arcs.
- Establishing a clear personal connection to drive and enliven the story.
- Deepening understanding of narrative cinematic technique and structure.
- Acquiring command of format, visual writing style, and dialogue.
- Removing the preciousness while learning to make decisions and work fast.

Students should anticipate 10-12 pages of writing PER WEEK. The final screenplay must be no less than 95 pages and no more than 110 pages when formatted according to industry standards (Final Draft or equivalent).

This is a workshop class where you will be expected to contribute. As such, your attendance and participation are mandatory for the process and your final grade.

Our class time will be divided between lecture, discussion and in-class table readings of your pages, with emphasis on the latter. Students will be broken up into reading groups, with an

alternating weekly rotation. Depending on progress, we may also have guest speakers and in-class screenings towards the end of the semester.

Required Reading/Viewing:

The Tools of Screenwriting by Howard/Mabley

Save the Cat by Blake Snyder

Writing for Emotional Impact by Karl Iglesias

We will be referring to these texts regularly so please read both ASAP. Additionally, we will read and discuss at least one screenplay from a recent major motion picture (to be determined). You will also be expected to watch movies and scenes outside of class.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1 01/14/25

Introductions and discussion of expectations for the semester.

Lecture: A Good Story Well told.

The first step in feature development: how to develop and manage ideas, and address broad questions regarding potential stories: genre, tone, audience and the writer's connection to the material. "Is this a movie?" How to write a logline.

Assignment:

- 1) Write 3 loglines for potential development into a feature script for the semester. Due by next class.
- 2) Watch and read the screenplay for either Barbie or Get Out and do a breakdown of the main structural beats as laid out in the template doc.

Week 2 01/21/25

Pitch your 3 loglines to class for feedback and choose which idea to develop as your screenplay for the semester. Shaping the story. Discuss pitches and expand story beats.

Assignment:

- 1) Develop your pitch. Select one of the loglines to pursue as your project for the semester. Identify protagonist, antagonist, central goal and conflict.
- 2) Complete the Character questionnaires for both your protagonist and antagonist.

- 3) Write a one paragraph synopsis of the story as envisioned thus far.
- 4) Write a one paragraph monologues for both the protagonist and antagonist in their own voice as they recount a significant event in their life.
- 5) Write a scene with conflict introducing your main character and the world of the story. Use the Scene structure questionnaire to structure your scene.

Week 3 01/28/25

Read and discuss last week's assignments. Continue to develop and shape stories. Break into GROUP A & B writing sections. Transforming synopsis into 3 act breaks and sequences for outline.

Assignment: Create the outline for your screenplay using the template (Note: the outline is a living document that will be discussed and modified repeatedly throughout the semester as your story takes shape.)

Week 4 02/04/25

Discuss and trouble shoot outlines. Find comparable film to study for structure, character introductions and other elements.

Assignment: Both groups start writing Act I, Seq1. (12-15 pages)

Week 5 02/11/25

GROUP A table read Act I, Seq 1. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: both groups keep writing Act I.

Week 6 02/18/25

GROUP B table read Act I, Seq 1. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: Both groups keep writing Act I. Group A will table read Act I, Seq 2 in class next week. (12-15 pages)

Week 7 02/25/25

GROUP A table read ACT I, Seq 2. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: Both groups continue writing. Group B will read ACT 1, Seq 2 next week (12-15 pgs).

Week 8 03/04/25

GROUP B table read ACT I, Seq 2. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment : both groups work on Act II, Seq 3&4

Week 9 03/11/25

GROUP A table read ACT II, Seq 3&4.

Assignment : keep working on Act II, Seq 3&4

SPRING RECESS MARCH 16-23

Week 10 03/25/25

GROUP B table read Act II, Seq 3&4. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: Work on Act II, Seq 5&6

Week 11 04/01/25

GROUP A table read Act II, Seq 5&6. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: Start working on Act III,Seq 7&8

Week 12 04/08/25

GROUP B table read Act II, Seq 5&6. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: Keep working on ACT III, Seq 7&8

Week 13 04/15/25

GROUP A table read Act III, Seq 7&8. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: Keep working on Act III, Seq 7&8

Week 14 04/22/25

GROUP B table read Act III, Seq 7&8. Feedback and discussion.

Assignment: Keep working on Act III, Seq 7&8

Week 15 04/29/25

Last class. Keep workshopping scripts as needed

PLEASE NOTE: it is understood not everyone will reach the finish line at the same time. For this reason, you are allotted two additional weeks from final class to submit the completed screenplay.

******COMPLETED SCREENPLAY (no less than 95 and no more than 110 pages) is DUE by 4pm May 13, 2024.**

PLEASE NOTE:Because of the additional week granted there will be no further extensions.

Grading Criteria/Evaluation:

While there are many great and varied storytelling traditions in the world, this class focuses on the Hollywood tradition as practiced both in the major studios as well as the smaller independent ones.

This includes a three act narrative with all its structural components as taught during the semester including - but not limited to – Prologue, Status Quo, Catalyst, Main Tension, Midpoint, Climax, Resolution, Epilogue etc. All with an eye towards a character driven story with maximum dramatic impact and audience participation.

Great emphasis will be placed on creating compelling/multidimensional characters with clear goals, needs, obstacles, conflicts and transformations. This includes believable and well-rounded protagonists and antagonist who display a range of human of emotions and behaviors, whose wants, needs, choices and action drive the story.

Your work will be evaluated based on your attention to character development and arc, plot structure, themes, visuals, cinematic appeal and, last but not least, proper format and grammar.

You will also be graded you on your ability to receive and give feedback and make the necessary improvements while telling a unique story using your personal voice and imagination.

PLEASE NOTE: This being an introductory FICTIONAL NARRATIVE SCREENPLAY course with a compressed schedule, the instructor reserves the right to exclude an idea for a screenplay that is deemed too complex or beyond the scope of this class.

Examples of stories not taught in this class include (but are not limited to):

Revisions of pre-existing screenplays. (You must write an original story)

Documentaries

Adaptations

Stories to which the student does not have the underlying rights

Autobiography/Biography/True life/Legacy

Musicals

Ensemble pieces that do not have a central protagonist

Complex historical stories that require intensive research

Nonlinear

Experimental

*****UNLESS OTHERWISE INSTRUCTED ALL WORK IS DUE IN PDF FORMAT BY NOON ON THE DAY OF CLASS UPLOADED TO CLASS DROPBOX*****

Grading Breakdown:

Logline, Bio/Character questionnaire, Monologues, Scenes and Outline.	15% (3% each)
Act I	25%
Act II	25%
Act III	25%
Participation in class discussions, feedback, and assignments	10%

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%

A : Work of **excellent** quality. Outstanding application of the dramatic principles and fulfillment of course requirements and deadlines as specified in the syllabus.

B : Work of **good** quality. Above average fulfillments of course requirements and deadlines.

C : Work of **fair** quality. Minimum fulfillment of course requirements and deadlines for passing graduate credit.

C-: **FAIL to meet minimum grade for credit. NON PASSING GRADE.**

CLASSROOM DECORUM:

We must respect each other, our collaboration, and the work at hand. No cell-phones, food nor beverages, except water. Laptops allowed for class purposes only.

Expectation of professionalism and academic integrity:

All submitted 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.

Additionally all submitted work must be original, created by the individual student. Any plagiarism or use of AI writing programs will result in an automatic failed grade.

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.

However the limited use of AI tools such as Chat GPT for research and grammar/proofreading corrections are permitted.

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.

Students are expected be on time, prepared for each class, and meet professional standards. CTWR 513 only meets once a week and timely attendance is mandatory and 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 equates to one full absence.

NOTE: Exceptions will be made in the case of 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 course work.

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.

Expectation of professionalism:

All submitted 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.

Additionally all submitted work must be original, created by the individual student. Any plagiarism or use of AI writing programs will result in an automatic failed grade.

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:

[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.

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