

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
JOHN WELLS DIVISION OF WRITING FOR FILM & TV
CTWR 453: ADVANCED FEATURE REWRITING
SPRING 2025
SECTION: 19411D
(4 UNITS)

Time: MONDAY, 10am – 12:59pm

Location: SCA 245

Instructor: Tom Abrams

Tel: 323/333-5955

Email: tabrams@usc.edu

Office: SCA 357

Office hours: By appointment

CTWR 453:
REWRITING THE FEATURE SCRIPT

Writing is creating something out of nothing. Rewriting is creating something out of what is there. -- Robert Towne

CLASS OVERVIEW:

CTWR 453 is a course in which you will rewrite a previous draft of a story you have worked on before and shape it into a more complete work. Character, structure, scene writing, atmosphere and dialogue will be worked on and polished.

To this end, you will read and annotate your own first draft and that of your fellow students. After analysis and discussion you will develop an organized plan for your rewrite, following an assigned schedule.

Rewriting your own material is one of the most challenging skills to master in the field of screenwriting. It is difficult to have perspective and insight on your screenplay. Writers must learn to let go and embrace new ideas. There are often several steps backward before moving forward. This can be a difficult and challenging experience, but a necessary process to take your work to another level. Please come to class with an open mind, a willingness to grow, and a desire to move your story in new directions.

This is a workshop class; in addition to working on your own script, you are expected to help your classmates during the process of 'rebuilding' their scripts. Class participation is a major component of the course, as is the importance of working steadily on your script and meeting deadlines. Finally, completion and quality of the revised script will determine your grade.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:

- To complete a feature length script with significant revisions.
- Writers will be encouraged to keep their stories unique and personal.
- Character development and story structure will be reviewed.

- The subtler aspects of screenwriting such as contrast, subtext, milking the scene and subplot, will be stressed and demonstrated.
- To understand the importance of theme in shaping your screenplay.
- To develop the ability to critique a feature script and give collaborative notes.
- There is a tendency to rely on plot in the first draft. During revisions the students will be encouraged to reinvestigate their characters. Are they dynamic enough? Do they encounter enough obstacles? Are they true to the character biographies? Did the writer rely too much on convention, rather than on their understanding of human nature? Did they write challenging roles for actors?
- Students will be challenged on the visual quality of their scripts. Did they use location, time of day, props to enhance the story? Does their script invite the cinematographer, the prop person, the sound designer, the set designer, the director, etc. to collaborate? Does it challenge them to do exciting work?
- Does the script say what you want it to say? Does it have a satisfying resolution? Does it have the emotional and intellectual impact you want it to have? What does it say about the human condition?

COURSE READING:

"Writing is Rewriting," by Jack Epps

"How to Build a Great Screenplay," by David Howard

"Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach" by Paul Gulino

SUBMITTING MATERIAL:

Assignments must be posted as PDFs 24 hours before class to our **class Dropbox**. If you have trouble with the Dropbox for some reason, email everyone your material. Late work will be downgraded. Please arrive to class **HAVING READ** all your classmates' assignments and having given serious thought both to what they got right and what could be improved.

Remember, work must be professionally presented – properly formatted and free of typos, misspellings, errors in grammar and syntax. *Scripts not conforming to these guidelines cannot receive a grade in the A range.*

GRADING CRITERIA:

Your grade will be based upon: Delivery and Quality of your written **Evaluation** of other students' scripts (5%), your **Master Notes List** (5%), **Rewrite Plan** (10%) your **Rewrite Outline** (20%), your **Completed Second Draft** (50%), and your **Participation** in class (10%).

Attendance is mandatory. You are expected to be class on time.

As per Writing Division policy the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:

A 100% to 94% A- 93% to 90% B+ 89% to 87% B 86% to 83% B- 82% to 80% C+ 79% to 77%

C 76% to 73% C- 72% to 70% D+ 69% to 67% D 66% to 63% D- 62% to 60% 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.

[Please be aware that as a SCA Production 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.]

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.

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.

ALL WORK MUST BE ORIGINAL IDEAS CREATED BY YOU AND YOU ALONE.
ADAPTATIONS OF ANY KIND (I.E. BOOKS, STORIES, FEATURES, TV SERIES) WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.

RECORDING DEVICES

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

LAPTOP AND CELLPHONE POLICY:

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

WRITING DIVISION ATTENDANCE POLICY

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

CTWR 413 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 equate 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 or SA 24 hours prior to class start time if they need to miss class for any reason.

ASSIGNMENTS & SCHEDULE

SESSION 1: Introduction: Instructor presents working method of the course.

Each writer delivers hard copy of first draft to instructor.

Each writer tells us about their screenplay: Discuss basic premise and characters, especially main character, theme and other major qualities.

We will divide class into two groups (A,B) for reading and feedback.

Assignment for next class: Read and make notes on **Group A** screenplays (including your own).

Focus on strengths of the project and what might better.
Consider characterization, dramatic values of the story, scenes and structure.

1 page per screenplay.

SESSION 2: HOLIDAY. NO CLASS. BUT NOTES ARE STILL DUE.

Screenplay evaluation and analysis: **Group A**

***Group A will meet with instructor during week.**

Group A writers should take notes on feedback and then create a “**Master Note List**” - organizing their notes into categories such as: theme, character development, story points, scene work, relationships, etc.

Assignment for next week: Read and make notes on **Group B** screenplays (including your own).

Focus on strengths of the project and what might better.
Consider characterization, dramatic values of the story, scenes and structure.

1 page per screenplay.

SESSION 3: Screenplay evaluation and analysis: Group B

Discussion of student feedback. **Group B** writers should take notes on feedback and then create a “**Master Note List**” - organizing their notes into categories such as: theme, character development, story points, scene work, relationships, etc.

Assignment for next week: All writers develop their Master Note List, prioritizing most critical notes to address in rewrite. Give special attention to Character definition, development and arc/change.

1-3pages.

SESSION 4: Discuss Group A & B Master Note List + priorities.

Assignment for next week: All writers use Master Note List to prepare a “**Rewrite Plan**” prioritizing elements that need changing, strengthening.

Plan should focus on **1)** Character changes/enhancements (especially protagonist and “antagonist”, but also subplot characters), **2)** – Structural changes/enhancements, **3)** – Theme (What is it? How is it evidenced and explored in both 1 and 2?)

SESSION 5: Discuss **Group A & B** rewrite plans.

Assignment for next week: Based on rewrite plan writers create a new structure **OUTLINE** based on rewrite plan.

6-8 pages.

SESSION 6: **HOLIDAY. NO CLASS. BUT GROUP A MATERIAL DUE.**

Review outlines for rewrite from **Group A**.

***Group A meets with Instructor during week for notes.**

SESSION 7: Review outlines for rewrite from **Group B**.

FINAL OUTLINES DUE

Assignment for next two weeks: Rewrite Act One.

SESSION 8,9: Discuss Act One rewrites , **Group A & B**.

Roughly 10-15 pages each week.

Discussion of sequences / scenes based on student progress.

SESSION 10-13: Act Two rewrites , **Group A & B**

Roughly 10-15 pages each week.

Discussion of sequences / scenes based on student progress.

SESSION 14-15: Act Three rewrites, **Group A & B**

Roughly 10-15 pages each week.

Discussion of sequences / scenes based on student progress.

SESSION 16: More rewrites. **LAST CLASS.**

SESSION 17: **Screenplay polish/Completed Draft Due – Friday, May 2.**

HAVE A GREAT SUMMER!

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

The School of Cinematic Arts Support Systems and Statements

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

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.