

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
Screenwriting CTWR 250 – Breaking The Story
Spring 2019
(Two Units, Required, Section: 19358D)

Instructor: Don Bohlinger
Class Schedule: Wednesday 10-12:50
Class Location: SCA 342
Office Hours: Wednesday 1-4, SCA 354, or by appointment
Contact Information: dfb@usc.edu, 323 804-0110

COURSE GOALS:

- Ideation: learn where and how to find film and television stories
- Voice: investigate and expand your *unique* storytelling instincts, interests and nature
- Character: learn how to develop compelling characters who will drive your stories
- Theme: learn how to discover and grow your theme, an expression of your vision
- Development: learn how to “break” these stories, structurally, into a saleable pitch
- Synopsis: learn how to write two compelling 5 page synopses.
- Portfolio: complete ten screen and television pitches

COURSE OBJECTIVE:

“The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.”
Muriel Rukeyser

Where do you find your ideas? When you do have an idea how do you develop that idea into a relatable story? And once you have this story how do you write it as a pitch you can sell?

Every screenwriter has had this happen to him or her. You are at a party and an uncle or an aunt or friend pulls you into a corner and says, “I’ve got a movie for you.” Then they tell you a story and say, “It’s yours, write it!” And that is the difference between a professional writer and a dilettante. The professional writer has to find a way to write it. A professional writer has to break the whole story, beginning to end, and most importantly, break that story through the compelling characters they have created.

It begins and ends with character: their hopes, their dreams, their wants.

This is an introductory course in writing for the screen and television in which you develop your resources as a storyteller. We will explore how and where you find your stories. We will mine your faculties of memory and observation; sharpen your storytelling toolbox by experimenting with genre conventions, group storytelling exercises and an engaged writer’s table.

The aim is help you find four feature (or television series) stories from four different sources and express each as a short 3- 5 page synopsis.

The emphasis is on the discovery and development of cinematic and television stories, and the way of telling them should be yours alone. Imagination, as Samson Raphaelson said, “is not the capacity to invent but the ability to see and develop what is there.” In exercising your imagination this course provides you with a foundation for your future work as a professional screenwriter.

CLASS SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNMENTS:

Part One: Personal Stories

Week 1: 1/9 – *Where do we find stories?*

- Discuss class expectations, deadlines and syllabus.
- How do you find your stories? How do professionals find their stories?
- Discuss Lars and The Real Girl/In Bruges/The Way Way Back. Discussion of the breaking of these story.
- In class: News stories – we will distribute several news stories – in teams of three we will develop stories.
- Introduction to pitching and the writing of the three-page synopsis.
- Homework: Bring your favorite child/teenage or family story (one that happened to you or someone in your family) to class. Write it as a three-page synopsis.
 - What is special about it? Why do you tell it?
 - Who is the main character and why we care about him/her?
 - Beginning, middle and end of the story.
- Homework: Read *The Way Way Back*

Week 2: 1/16 – *Memory Stories?*

- Discuss your Memory Story. How do we create compelling stories from life? Is there a feature film here? Or is there a television series?
- Homework: bring in you greatest fear or greatest fantasy...

Week 3: 1/23 – *Greatest fear or fantasy stories?*

- Discuss greatest fear/fantasy. Who is your main character? Can you describe their moment (the exact scene) of greatest fear or fantasy? How to build to that moment?
- In class – break into groups and create a pitch for one of your two (fear or fantasy)...
- Homework – bring in something that makes you angry (can be personal or political) try to find the scene.

Week 4: 1/30 – *Writing from emotion to character?*

- Discuss thing that makes you angry. Is there a story there? A character? Develop it.
- Homework: three groups of three. Bring in five pitches for story episodes of a family sitcom: *Blackish*, *Modern Family*, *The Simpsons*, *Broad City*, etc.
- Read and screen *Lady Bird*.

Week 5: 2/6 – Writing Family Sitcom pitches

- Pitch and discuss sitcoms. Vote on the episode that gets picked up.
- Discuss *Lady Bird* – how sense of place helped her inspire the story.
- Homework: world building – photo essays (power point) of a world you would like to use for a story. Discuss *True Detective*, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, *Girls*, *Broad City*, *Friday Night Lights* and how these shows rely on a sense of place.

Part Two: Using Genre to challenge your character and shape your story**Week 6: 2/13 – Writing from place**

- Present your world to class. Discuss ways to find a story for it. Is there a character who is an outgrowth of your particular place. Where is the conflict?!
- Discuss genre and how genre can help shape a story and challenge your character.
- Homework: write a supernatural or horror-story pitch from a scenario. (Can be a *Black Mirror* or a feature pitch.) Concentrate on character and WHY the story happens to him/her.

Week 7: 2/20 – The Supernatural/Horror Story

- Pitch and discuss your supernatural or horror story pitches. Who is the main character and why do we care?
- Homework: Create a Trip With Destination (Road Trip) pitch.
- Read *Little Miss Sunshine*.

Week 8: 2/27 – Road Trip

- Discuss Road Trip pitches.
- Homework: Create a character (biography) who is unable to love.

Week 9: 3/6 – Rom-Com

- Discuss character who is unable to love. What is their NEED?
- In class – in groups find a perfect foil for that character. (A character MOST able to love.)
- Homework (for March 19): write a rom-com pitch. How do they meet? What is the conflict? How does location help inform the story? How does it end?

March 13: Spring Recess

Midterm Assignment: Pick one of your pitches and write a five page expose.

Week 11: 3/20 – Midterm Projects

- Midterms due.
- Pitch your rom-com story. Is the character compelling enough? Is his/her need fulfilled?
- Homework: in teams pitch 5 episodes of a detective series, procedural or hospital drama.
- Long Term: find a myth from classical literature that is interesting to you and could inspire a story.

Part Three: Finding stories in myth, legend or existing material

Week 12: 3/27 – *One-hour episodic: Detective, Hospital, Procedural Pitches*

- Pitch episodes for one-hour series. Vote on winning episode that gets picked up.
- Homework – Long term (3 weeks) begin to research a character for a bio-pic. Talk about Walk the Line, On the Basis of Sex, etc... What interests you about the character? How do you get into the story? It can be an historical figure or someone from your life. But it MUST be compelling!
- Homework next week: find a classical myth, (talk about how movies have used Shakespeare and Jane Austen) and create a high school story (comedy/romance/drama) using your chosen myth as a guideline.

Week 12: 4/3 – *Writing from Existing Material (Myth and Legend)*

- Discuss your myth-pitches. Is your main character strong enough? How did the myth help inspire/inform your story?
- Discuss the hero's journey. Talk about Star Wars/Harry Potter/Comic Book Stories.
- Homework: Create a hero or superhero and a potential story – series. Who is you Luke, your Harry, your Wonderwoman. What is their introduction (or creation story?) Who is their guide? Who is their antagonist?

Week 13: 4/10 – *The Hero's Journey and Superheroes*

- Discuss your hero/superhero stories.
- Homework: find a movie or series and research how the writer came to find the story. What inspired him/her? What was their first idea?

Week 14: 4/17 – *Writing for an Actor/Location/Genre*

- Discuss your movie or series research. How did your writer find/create his/her story?
- In Class – put actors' names in a hat. Put locations in a hat. Put genre in a hat. Teams pick and use the class to create a feature story for the actor.
- Homework – bring your biography story pitch

Week 15: 4/24 – *Pitching the Bio-Pic*

- Discuss your biography pitches. Is the character compelling enough to carry a feature and interest an actor? Are there enough obstacles?

Last Class Day – April 24

May 7th – Final Portfolio is due:

1. Six Short Pitches (from class) one page each –
2. Rewritten midterm expose – 5 pages
3. Final expose (chosen from the second half of class pitches) 5 pages

EVALUATION CRITERIA:

CNTV 250 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. The ability to generate compelling characters and ideas for cinema and television.

3. Demonstrated understanding of the fundamental principles of a good story: character, tension, and movement.
4. Demonstrated understanding how to workshop and develop that idea into a story.
5. The ability to develop a feature/pilot synopsis.

GRADING WEIGHTS:

CNTV 250 grades are based on:

- Weekly Writing Assignments (final portfolio of ideas)50%
- Midsemester Synopsis.....10%
- Final Synopsis.....20%
- Reading and responding to classmates work (writer's room).....20%

Attendance is required. Tardiness will not be tolerated.

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

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:

Laptops are welcome (but should be used for reading and responding to classwork, no facebook, no email, please!) Cell phones off.

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.

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.

*Note: Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and 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. The telephone number for DSP 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 Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* <https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/departments/departments-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage sarc@usc.edu describes reporting options and other resources.

Support Systems

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu/> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

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.