

COM 325 Writing for Film and Television

Master Syllabus, submitted by Susan Ryan, Associate Professor, Communication Studies

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines the fundamental elements of screenwriting for the narrative film. Through a combination of lectures, workshop, screenings, writing assignments and discussion, the class stresses the development of skills in story, structure, character, scene writing, and dialogue. Students are expected to watch, analyze and discuss films, as well as to read, analyze and critique scripts - both their own and those of their classmates. By the end of the course, students should have a solid foundation in visual storytelling, dramatic structure, and screenplay format. Throughout the semester, students will be given assignments to master the fundamentals of screenwriting and will have two major projects – one being a short script, the other being the first act of a feature-length screenplay.

COURSE PURPOSE & LEARNING GOALS

1. To learn the craft of screenwriting. This includes: story, structure, character, scene work, dialogue, premises, pitching, rewriting, and screenplay format.
2. To gain insight to the business of screenwriting. Topics covered include the life of a screenwriter, standard industry practices, representation, and internships.
3. To start a writing portfolio consisting of one short script and the beginning of a feature length screenplay.

COURSE MATERIALS

Required Texts:

Write Screenplays that Sell the Ackerman Way by Hal Ackerman. (Los Angeles, CA: Tallfellow Press, 2003)

The Essentials of Screenwriting: The Art, Craft and Business of Screenwriting (New York, NY: Plume Press, an imprint of Penguin, 2010) by Richard Walter

Students should have (or easy access to) a computer with internet access. Links to relevant screenplays will be listed or given out in class.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

There are many books and websites devoted to screenwriting. The following are a few recommendations to supplement the assigned textbooks and articles listed on the syllabus.

<http://www.script-o-rama.com/>

www.dailyscript.com

<http://johnaugust.com/2007/how-to-introduce-character>

<http://twoadverbs.blogspot.com/2009/11/unsuccessful-screenwriters.html>

Linda Seger, *Making a Good Script Great* (Los Angeles: CA: Samuel French, 1994)

Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Publishing, 2007)

SOFTWARE: Screenwriting software is practically required. The most popular version is called Celtx, which is available here: <http://celtx.en.softonic.com/> (Do not use the online version where you work in a web browser). For serious writers, I recommend Final Draft.

You are free to use Microsoft Word or other similar programs (even a typewriter!), but you'll still be expected to write your pages in standard screenplay format.

Printing is sometimes a problem, especially in the beginning of the semester. It is with that in mind that I advise you to print early. Reminder: always print from a saved PDF file, not the Celtx file. You need internet access to create a PDF file with Celtx.

GRADING:

- Assignments/quizzes: 35%
- Participation: 15%
- Midterm: 25%
- FINAL Project : Act One of feature screenplay: 25%
- TOTAL: 100%

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

ATTENDANCE:

Students are expected to attend class on time. If you leave class early without permission, you will be considered absent. Students will be responsible for obtaining notes from classmate(s) if absent and contact the professor by the Monday before class if he/she has any questions. Since assignments are listed on the syllabus, they are still due the next class, even if the student missed the week's class. **Participation in class discussion is a part of your grade, so if you don't attend you cannot participate.** Please review the college's Absence and Attendance Policy if you have any questions.

<http://policies.tcnj.edu/policies/digest.php?docId=9134>

ASSIGNMENTS:

Writing assignments --Specific details to be discussed in class. General formatting guidelines are as follows:

- Please type all assignments and bind them (stapled or paper clipped).
- Proofread! Grammatical/spelling mistakes will cost dearly both in this course and out in the "real world."
- Adhere to page requirements as indicated on the syllabus. Use appropriate fonts and margins. Do not go over the page length – it's about quality, not quantity.
- Please print this page, legibly sign it, and bring it the first day of class. That way, I'll know you actually read the syllabus.
- Do not "correct" your work by handwriting, crossing out, or using white out on the page. You are just calling attention to your mistake.
- Most assignments may be submitted as late as the next class meeting with a grade reduction. If not submitted by the next class, they are given a zero. Late assignments will be given minimal feedback.

PARTICIPATION – Come to class having completed readings and assignments, ready to discuss them.

- **MIDTERM** Take notes constantly and keep up with the readings. That is all.

FINAL -- The final will be your final project that will be handed in during finals period. TCNJ's final examination policy is available on the web:

<http://www.tcnj.edu/~academic/policy/finalevaluations.htm>

Evaluation Scale

A 100-94 A- 93- 91

B+ 90-88 B 87-84 B- 83-81

C+ 80-78 C 74-77 C- 73-71

D+ 70-68 D 67-61 F 60 and Below

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE:

While I expect you to do all of your writing on a computer, cell phones and laptops will **not be permitted** in class unless there are extenuating circumstances. Everyone should be participating in discussion while in class.

Academic Integrity Policy

Students are expected to turn in their own work at all times. Plagiarism will not be tolerated! TCNJ's academic integrity policy is available on the web:

<http://www.tcnj.edu/~academic/policy/integrity.html>.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Policy

Any student who has a documented disability and is in need of academic accommodations should notify the professor of this course and contact the Office of Differing Abilities Services (609-771-2571). Accommodations are individualized and in accordance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1992. TCNJ's Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) policy is available on the web: <http://policies.tcnj.edu/policies/viewPolicy.php?docId=8082>

COURSE SCHEDULE

WEEK 1

- Introduction to the course with an overview of the syllabus
- Viewing of a short film and a feature film Assignments:
 1. Read this: <http://www.oscars.org/awards/nicholl/scriptsample.pdf>
 2. Adapt the short film in class and add your own dialogue. 2 pages max.
 3. Read Walters, Ch. 1 “Seven Naughty Words”

WEEK 2

- Discussion: What is a screenplay? What is not a screenplay?
- Screenwriting 101 – being the writer, screenplay format, grammar, and software
- The C Word – CONFLICT. And stakes! (if your hero loses, so what?)
- Writing a short film – the Inciting incident, escalation, and finishing strong
- Assign read-thru schedule of scenes for the next three weeks. Assignments: 1. Read the David Mamet memo to The Unit. Google it. IT’S IN ALL CAPS 2. Write a scene with conflict, 2 page max. Group 1, email your copy to me.
- Read Walters, Ch. 4 & 5, “Creative Choices” and “Conflict”

WEEK 3

- Discussion of readings / Read thru of Group 1 scenes
- Dialogue – what is it? What it isn’t, text/subtext, actors, hiding exposition, tags
- Where to begin and end a story, a scene

Assignments:

1. Write an argument between 2 people, 2 pages max. Take the side of The opinion you strongly feel the opposite of. Group #2, email copy to me.
2. Read Ackerman: “Can Writing Be Taught,” “A Word or Two About the Writer’s Life” Walters, Ch. 3 “The Personal Screenplay”

WEEK 4

- Guidelines for writing a beat sheet / outline for a short film
- A showing of good vs. bad scenes – writer’s objective vs. character’s objective
- Read thru of Group 2 scenes Assignments:
 1. Read Ackerman “What a Screenplay Isn’t,” “What a Screenplay Is” , Walters, Ch. 9, 10 “Dialogue” “Action and Setting”
 2. Write a scene based on Valentine’s Day. 2 pages max. ,Group #3 email copy to me.
 3. Write your outline for your short film. Everyone, bring 2 PAPER copies.

WEEK 5

- Read thru of scenes
- Development of your short screenplay via outline
- The business and writing for television – comedies, dramas Assignments:
 1. Use feedback from today’s class and write your short screenplay – 8 to 12 pages. Remember cover page. This will be worth 25 pts (2.5x grade) and is due next class.
 2. Read Ackerman “Components of screenwriting “, Walters, Ch. 7 “Story”

WEEK 6

- DUE – short screenplay due at the beginning of class.
- * A Very Important Class on Structure * – 15, 30, 45, 60, 75, 90
- Assign films for the structural analysis assignment Assignments:
 - Structural analysis – your choice of film, due next week (double grade)
 - Write a 2 to 3 page teaser/cold open for a spec show or an original show. Group #4, email your copy to me.

1. Read Walters, Ch. 13 “The Writing Habit”

WEEK 7

- Read thru of Group 4 teasers/cold opens
 - Hand in structure analysis assignments / map out a few
 - More on structure – Endings A/B/C stories, earned endings, sacrifice
 - Character – the main character, arc, likability, flaws, development, emotion
Assignments:
1. Write a scene that is driven by character. 1pg max.
 2. Read the first 20 pages of *The Devil Wears Prada*. Be sure to do this!
Preferably a day or two before class while it's fresh in your mind.
http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/devil_wears_prada.pdf

WEEK 8 – BREAK**WEEK 9**

3. Adaptation / from script to screen – a look at *The Devil Wears Prada*
 4. A discussion of the development process
 5. Genres, premises, hooks, pitching Assignments:
1. Study for the midterm. It is based on BOTH lectures and readings.
 2. Come up with a couple of movie ideas. Write 2 loglines for a feature length movie.
Include the title and genre. Both should fit on 1 page.
 3. Read Ackerman “What Story Is, What Story Isn’t.”

WEEK 10**MIDTERM!**

- Pitch week – go over everybody’s *elevator* pitches and we’ll have a vote
Assignment:
1. Write your outline for your feature (same rules as the beat sheet for the short). It should be around 1 page, 1.5 pages MAX. Include the title and (revised) logline on top. Checklist: did you manage to establish the main character and his or her flaw? What’s the world of the story? What’s the inciting event? PONR?

WEEK 11

- WORKSHOP – going over your First Act outline Assignment:

1. Write the first 6 pages of your feature length screenplay. Bring 1 paper copy and email your copy to me as a PDF attachment with the subject line “First six.” This will be a double grade.

WEEK 12

- Begin workshop of pages Assignment:

1. Keep writing your screenplay. Your first Act (25 pages) is due on May 1.
2. Note: Please look at the attached rubric for specific guidance for final project

WEEK 13

- Continue workshop of pages Assignment:

1. Keep writing your screenplay. Your first Act (25 pages) is due on May 1.

WEEK 14 – April 24 • Finish workshop of pages

Assignment:

3. Complete your Act One (30 pages MINIMUM) of your feature length screenplay. Use feedback & notes from read-thru and make changes where applicable. Remember cover page!
 4. Read Walters, Ch. 16, 17 “Cooperation and Collaboration” “Script Sales”
- Agents and managers – the pros and cons Viable ways to possibly break in and this crazy business

WEEK 15 (FINALS WEEK)

Hand in your Act One Rewrite

SCREENPLAY RUBRIC

Criteria	Excellent	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Well Below
Good Dialogue	Screenplay includes a large amount of dialogue. The dialogue between characters seems like genuine talk that would occur between people. It is engaging and is consistent with the character's personality.	Screenplay has a sufficient amount of dialogue roughly 40% minimum, and is close to what it would sound like if people were talking to each other. It is engaging but at times may not be consistent with the characters personality.	Screenplay has a minimal use of dialogue and does not read as is does not read like genuine talking. It does not help the story and there is considerable inconsistency with the character's traits.	Screenplay has little to no dialogue and it is written without considering how people talk to each other. It is incoherent, does not fit with the story and it does not consider the character's personality.
Coherent Story	The story is an engaging tale and is creative and thought-provoking. The story keeps the reader in suspense, makes sense, and helps to promote the core message.	The story has elements that keep the reader interested. The story does not trail off in a direction that leaves the message behind.	The story is somewhat boring and the reader may not find it worth their time. The story doesn't entirely make sense and there are areas that don't seem to suggest a real scenario. The message is muddled but can still be recognized.	The story is boring or has no real direction to keep the audience interested. There are many parts that don't make a lot of sense. The message is lost and there is no reasoning behind why things are happening.
Core Message	The core message is clear and concise. It addresses some sort of social or psychological truth found in humanity.	The core message is well known but somewhat hard to pull out of the writing. It does address some truth in our lives.	The core message is nearly lost and may not be a message that has any real meaning in our life.	There is no core message and the writing has no true purpose or reasoning that makes valuable.
Grammar	Students are considerate of grammar and make sure to write all aspects of the screenplay with sound punctuation, sentence structure and spelling	Students make a good effort towards grammar and most aspects have good sentence structure, correct punctuation and spelling.	Students make little effort to focus on good grammar but the story is written with grammar that is good enough to allow people to understand.	Many errors in sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling.
Characters Developed	The characters are well developed and they are believable and genuine in their makeup. The writer provides many specifics to make aware what the characters' personalities looks like.	The characters are believable and are consistent in their makeup but lack details. The writer does not provide enough specifics to create a well rounded understanding of the character's personalities.	The characters do not seem real and are superficial or artificial. There are few details that address who the person is and they do not make a well rounded or believable character.	Characters are not developed and there are no details as to what the person likes, or who they are. There is no real identity that speaks to the people in the story.