

COMM 202 – Story for Film and TV

SOC 015, T/Th 1:00-2:15

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Office hours: Tuesdays 2:30-6:00 p.m. or by appointment

Course Objective

This course is designed to develop students' creative writing ability and specifically to prepare students to write for the screen. Students will be instructed in the styles, formats and approaches for writing motion picture scripts (i.e. writing for TV, film and video). During the semester, students will be required to complete several writing assignments, in-class exercises and group projects designed to expose them to the craft of writing for film and TV, with the goal of creating several short, polished scripts. At the conclusion of the course students will be able to:

- develop effective, narrative scenes and characters.
- write a spec TV script.
- write a short, narrative screenplay.
- write treatments and outlines for screenplays
- effectively evaluate, analyze and critique narrative screenwriting.

Texts and Readings

Required • *The Complete Screenwriter's Manual: A Complete Reference of Format & Style* by Bowles, Mangravite and Zorn.

• Scripts and materials placed on Sakai.

Optional *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* by Syd Field

Materials and Software

Required • **Celtx** screenwriting software (available for [free download for desktop](#))
OR Final Draft screenwriting software.

• Microsoft Word OR Open Office.

Computer Use:

Please be aware that occasional software bugs, virus presence, human error and/or hardware failure can result in damaged, corrupted or deleted files. Consequently, it is your responsibility to back-up your project files during and after each use and to deliver readable, uncorrupted files in the required format. Computer failure is not a valid excuse for lost work or missed assignments.

Grading & Evaluation

Attendance policy: This class relies heavily on group workshops. Consequently, attendance and participation is important and will be included as part of your final grade. Any more than 3 absences, excused or unexcused, will reduce your participation grade by 2.5 points per absence. In addition, in-class work missed due to absence cannot be “made up.” It will be the student's responsibility to obtain notes or missed work from their classmates.

Late Work: Students are expected to complete all of the assigned projects and readings on time. Late projects will automatically be penalized 1 point per day (see below). No projects will be accepted more than one week (5 business days) after the original due date.

Grading & Evaluation:

Your final grade will be based on your participation in classroom discussions, workshops and exercises, and the quality of your writing assignments. Emphasis will be placed on completing polished, finished pieces, formatted to industry standards; consequently, many of the assignments will build on previous work and students are expected to apply what they've learned in group or individual critique to each subsequent assignment.

Unless otherwise specified, written assignments will receive a score between 1-20, using the grading rubric below, with 0-5 points assigned to each criterion in the rubric (0 = poor or unacceptable; 5 = excellent or near perfect):

Grading Rubric

- Deadline – full points if delivered on time, 1 point subtracted for each day late.
- Format – formatted to industry standards (margins, style), meets assignment goals & criteria.
- Writing – spelling, grammar, punctuation, organization, clarity.
- Impact – originality, creativity, emotional impact, cinematic power, etc.

Your final grade will be calculated using the following formula:

Observation Exercise: 7.5%

Observation Script: 7.5%

Character Sketches: 7.5%

Other Writing Assignments: 10% each, 70% total

Participation & Attendance: 7.5%

Assignments

The meat of this course consists of completing the following assignments:

- The Observation Exercise.
- The Observation Script.
- The Character Sketch.
- The Action Script.
- The Scene.
- The Rewrite.
- The Spec Script.
- Original Short: Pitch & Treatment.
- Original Short: First Draft.
- Original Short: Final Draft.

All written assignments must be typed, formatted correctly (as per assignment description) and delivered electronically in the required format (Word doc, text file, Final Draft or Celtx files) via e-mail (you will receive an “I got it” confirmation within 24 hours). On workshop days, 4 students will be selected in advance to have their work critiqued and evaluated in class. Students whose writing is scheduled to be work-shopped must deliver their assignment 24-hours in advance. Students can only switch workshop days with permission of the instructor.

**** The instructor reserves the right to revise or change anything in this syllabus. Work created in/for this course can be re-used and shared by the instructor with other students/classes.***

Assignment Descriptions

• ***The Observation Exercise*** – go to an off-campus public location, sit in one spot for at least a full hour, and record in writing what you observe (see and hear). Describe the physical location, the “characters” who inhabit it, the actions they take and the words (dialogue) that you overhear. Record your observations as accurately and succinctly as possible. Feel free to focus on particular behaviors, people, events or conversations that you find interesting, but don’t worry at this point about structure, order or story. Simply record your observations freehand, stream of consciousness style. Try to be as objective as possible in your observations. DO NOT invent, judge, conclude or use metaphor to replace or supplement accurate description. DO NOT write in first person or describe what you’re thinking. When you’re done, transcribe your observations into a 2-3 page type-written document using Word or Open Office, which you should deliver electronically as a txt or docx file via e-mail. Note: the Observation Exercise will be evaluated on three criteria: 1) Deadline, 2) Writing and 3) Impact.

• ***The Observation Screenplay*** – convert your Observation Exercise into a properly formatted screenplay, with scene headings, description, action, characters and dialogue. If you’d like, feel free to focus on the most interesting, dramatic or visual elements of your original observation and give your screenplay some order (simple story structure); however, once again, you should avoid adding to, supplementing or embellishing your original observations. Your Observation Screenplay should be 2-5 pages in length, completed in Final Draft or Celtx and delivered in one of those two formats via e-mail. Note: the Observation Script will be evaluated based on three criteria: 1) Deadline, 2) Writing and 3) Format.

• ***Character Sketches and Backgrounds*** – focus on 2 characters from your Observation Exercise. Create character backgrounds and sketches for the two characters inspired by your observations of them. Feel free to embellish, invent and exaggerate as you feel fit, considering what would make a film or scene including these characters have the most dramatic or comedic impact. Make sure that your sketches include information covering: their look; their background; important relationships in their lives; their goals; obstacles (internal/external) to achieving their goals; their fatal flaws and/or best characteristics; their hobbies and quirks; etc. Each character sketch should be roughly 1-2 type-written pages long, completed in Word or Open Office, and delivered electronically as a doc or txt file via e-mail. Note: the Character Sketches will be evaluated on three criteria: 1) Deadline, 2) Writing and 3) Impact.

• ***Action Scripts*** – take one or both of the characters developed in your sketches, place them in the original location from your Observation Exercises, and add conflict and action. Write a fictional scene in which your character confronts an obstacle or conflict WITHOUT using any dialogue (i.e. your script should consist only of scene headings, description and action). Think about how to imply character information simply thru action. Remember, the script should take place during one time and place (1 scene) and only contain description of what the audience sees and hears—there can be no description of what a character is thinking, no voice-over and NO DIALOGUE or descriptions of what a character says (i.e. no references to dialogue either). The scene should be roughly 2-3 pages in length, completed in proper screenplay format using Final Draft or Celtx and delivered electronically via e-mail.

• ***The Scene*** – write a full scene, with a clear beginning, middle and end, inspired by your original Observation Exercise and/or Character Sketches. If you'd like, you can simply flesh out your Action Script with dialogue OR you can write an entirely new scene. The scene should be 2-5 pages in length, completed in proper screenplay format using Final Draft or Celtx, and delivered electronically via e-mail.

• ***The Rewrite*** – using the scene you were provided in class, complete a revision, rewrite or polish of said script, punching up the action and dialogue. Try to maintain the general action and spirit of the original scene, keeping the principle character(s) intact, but feel free to add, embellish, remove, edit, restructure and otherwise revise the original. Be sure to address and fix the writing and formatting mistakes of the original. The scene should be 2-5 pages in length, completed in proper screenplay format using Final Draft or Celtx, and delivered electronically via e-mail.

• ***The Spec Script*** – after doing some background research (the assigned reading and screening) develop an idea for an episode of the television show *Modern Family*. Combining ideas and working with your assigned group, write a full-draft of a spec script that follows industry and show standards for format, style and length, contains a storyline for each family, and fits the tone and content of the show. You will complete a portion of the first draft individually, but your entire group will be responsible for the final draft of the script. The final draft should be 22-30 pages in length, completed using Celtx, and delivered electronically via e-mail. Note: the Spec will be evaluated based on four criteria: 1) Group Work, 2) Writing, 3) Format and 4) Impact.

• ***Original Short: Pitch & Treatment*** – complete a treatment for an original short film or pilot for a web series, containing no more than 3 principle characters, 3 principle locations or 10 total scenes. Your treatment should include basic story and plot information, brief (1 paragraph) character sketches, a 1-2 sentence logline, notes about the visual style, and (for a series) information about the broader story arc (what might happen in future episodes) following the examples provided in class. To help clarify your vision, refer to other films, the actors you'd like to see in the roles of your principle characters, and information about your intended audience. Be prepared to pitch your idea in class, using visual references where applicable. Your pitch should be approximately 3-5 minutes long. You will also submit a full treatment, which should be 2-3 pages long, written using Word or Open Office and delivered as a txt or docx file via e-mail.

• ***Original Short: First Draft*** – complete a first draft of your short screenplay or pilot (approximately 5-15 pages long). Make sure that your short has a clear beginning, middle and end, has no more than 3 major characters or locations, has a clear point of view and tone, and is written in proper screenplay format. The script should be completed using Final Draft or Celtx, and delivered in one of those two formats via e-mail.

• ***Original Short: Final Draft*** – revise, polish and punch-up your script, taking into account the critique and suggestions made by your peers and by the instructor. Think about how to make this short both more readable and more impactful. Solve the plot holes, and eliminate any unnecessary action, dialogue or description. Also, clarify the language and fix punctuation, typos, spelling or formatting mistakes. The script should be completed using Final Draft or Celtx, and delivered via e-mail on by the day of the final exam.

Course Schedule and Assignment Deadlines

Week 1
8/26-28 Syllabus and schedule review. Intro to visual writing. Assigning workshop days.
This American Life visual writing exercise. Observation exercise explained.
Assignment Due Week 2: The Observation Exercise.

Week 2
9/2-4 Workshop 1: Observation Exercise – Dunn, Schnittker, Kaniewski, Bush.
Formatting & Celtx. In-class: putting observations into screenplay form.
Assignment Due Week 3: The Observation Script.
Reading For Week 3: *The Visitor* (Sakai) and character guide.

Week 3
9/9-11 Workshop 2: Observation Scripts – McGuigan, Anderon, G'Francisco, Kurzawa.
Creating and developing characters. In-class character sketches.
Assignment Due Week 4: The Character Sketch.
Reading For week 4: Writing Action (Sakai).

Week 4
9/16-18 Workshop 3: Character Sketches – Kane, Bacuyag, Farinas, Jesse.
Adding action and conflict. In-class writing exercise: story in pictures.
Assignment Due Week 5: The Action Script.
Reading For week 5: *In the Bedroom* (Sakai).

Week 5
9/23-25 Workshop 4: Action Scripts – Gundersheimer, Tripp, Goncalves, Kristein.
Writing dialogue. Exploring subtext and exposition. In-class: bad dialogue.
Assignment Due Week 6: The Scene.
Reading For week 6: *Despicable Me* or *Gravity* (Sakai)

Week 6
9/30-10/2 Peer Evaluation Workshop: Evaluating The Scene.
Writing is rewriting. Collabo-writing. Story Structure.
Assignment Due Week 7: The Rewrite.
Reading for week 7: Mamet (Sakai)

***** *Fall Break* *****

Week 7
10/9 Workshop 5: Rewrites – Duffy, Vargas Estrada, Simon.
Assignment Due Week 8 (10/16): The Spec Idea
Screening and Reading for Week 8: read and watch 2 *Modern Family* episodes (scripts on Sakai, video on Hulu or ABC.com).

Week 8
10/14-16 TV writing and the spec script. Pitch meetings, group writing, and step outlines.
In-class: pitches, group assignments and step outlines.
Assignment Due Week 9: The Spec – Step Outline (one storyline each)
Screening and Reading For Week 9: *Modern Family* “Toolkit” (Sakai) and more *Modern Family* episodes (Hulu or ABC.com)

Week 9
10/21-23 Overlapping storylines and punching up comedy. In-class: group writing.
Assignment Due Week 10: The Spec draft (draft 10/28, final 10/30).

- Week 10
10/28-30 In class: group re-writing.
Table Read: *Modern Family* Spec Scripts.
- Week 11
11/4-6 Table Read: *Modern Family* Spec Scripts cont'd.
Idea generation: shorts vs. pilots. Pitches, script treatments and story bibles.
Assignment Due Week 12: Pitches and Treatments for Original Short.
Reading for Week 12: Pitch templates on Sakai.
- Week 12
11/11-13 Full class: Pitches and Treatments. Step outlines continued.
Assignment Due Week 13: Original Short (First Draft)
- Week 13
11/18-20 Group Workshop: First Drafts. Individual Meetings.
Assignment Due Week 14: revised step-outline & logline for Original Short.
- Week 14
11/25 Full class: revised outlines & loglines for Original Short.
Assignment Due Week 15: Original Short (Final Draft).
- Week 15**
12/2-4 **Table Read and Workshop: Original Shorts.**

** No class meeting for the final exam. Original Short (Final Draft) due via e-mail by 5:00 p.m. on date of the final (Dec. 12, 2014)*