A screenplay is a story told with pictures, in dialogue and description, and placed within the context of dramatic structure. That’s what it is; that is its nature. It is the art of visual storytelling.

--Syd Field, Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting

Making a good script great is a process. It’s a process where the craft of writing and the art of writing together create the magic of film.

--Linda Seger, Making a Good Script Great

Everything at the end of the day when you’re making a movie starts with the material and how well written the script is . . . I’ve never seen a silk purse made from a sow’s ear . . . I’ve never seen it happen wherein a ‘crap’ script with ‘crap’ characters, a director somehow found a way to make a masterpiece out of it . . . And that’s the constant struggle we all sort of have as actors. It’s finding those gems and that’s why people grab onto them like vultures.

--Leonardo DiCaprio

Course Outcomes

This writing workshop will give you the knowledge and tools necessary to write original screenplays, from the story concept to the final draft to the pitch. Since great movies start with great ideas, we will begin by gathering ideas from a variety of sources and shaping our ideas into three short scripts. Here are the elements that make up the screenwriting process. Your work this semester should demonstrate your understanding of and ability to apply these basic principles.

• Screenplay Format
• Three-Act Structure
• Main Plot
• Sub Plots
• Scene Writing
• Scene Sequence Writing
• Cohesiveness and Momentum
• Transitions and Turning Points
• Conflict
• Character Functions and Development
• Dialogue
• Descriptive Detail
• Theme
• The Pitch
Work Requirements

By the end of fall semester, each of you will have written two 10-12 minute scripts and one 20-minute script. The rule is that one page of script equals approximately one minute of screen time.

The first part of the course will be devoted to lectures on the elements of screenwriting, discussion, and instruction in using the screenwriting software. We will be using Final Draft, which is installed on the computers in our classroom. This is the screenplay formatting program that most professional and beginning screenwriters use.

Since this is a writing workshop, a significant portion of the course will be devoted to writing and critiquing. At any time during our work-shopping sessions, I am available for conferences and to help you work through any questions/issues on your script. Periodically, we will have table reads of your scripts with student reactions/suggestions to follow. On occasion, you will also act out parts of your script. These exercises allow you to work out problems with plot structure, characterization, scene transitions, etc. Participation and a sense of team spirit are essential for the successful completion of the course.

I will give quizzes on lecture material, readings, and/or assign exercises for you to complete. In addition, you will pitch your screenplay in the final session.

I may also assign readings from simplyscripts.com (a website devoted to providing hundreds of screenplays for you to read—FREE), and, throughout the course, we will be watching scenes from classic and contemporary films that illustrate excellent screenwriting techniques and help you work through your own script challenges.

Grading

15% Short Script #1 (10-12 pages)
20% Short Script #2 (10-12 pages)
35% Script #3 (20 pages)
10% Quizzes/Exercises
10% Class participation
10% Pitch (Final session)

Reading Schedule

Disclaimer: This schedule may change depending on your progress as we work through the elements of screenwriting.

I will work in films/film clips to illustrate screenwriting concepts.
Aug 28/30  Overview of screenwriting
Gathering ideas: Read Chapter 1 in Seger
Sample scripts
The Three-Act Structure: Read Chapter 2 in Seger

Sep 4/6   Expositions: Film Clips
Subplots: Read Chapter 3 in Seger
Creating the scene and the scene sequence: Read Chapter 6 in Seger
Scene transitions/turning points

Sep 11/13 Film In and Out
Discussion/Exercise
Creating great characters: Read Chapters 10, 11, 12, & 13 in Seger

Sep 18/20 Introduction to Final Draft
Creating great characters
Making the dialogue work
Begin work on script #1
Balancing dialogue and images: Read Chapter 9 in Seger

Sep 25/27 Ramping up the conflict
Film clips
Screenplay principles (how to write montages, phone calls, voice overs, off screens, foreign language exchanges, etc.)
Workshop on script #1

Oct 2/4 Table reads
Workshop on script #1

Oct 9/11 Workshop on script #1
**Short script #1 due Thursday, Oct 11**

Oct 16/18 Keeping it moving: Read Chapter 4 in Seger
Creating a cohesive script: Read Chapter 7 in Seger
Brainstorming ideas for script #2

Oct 23/25 Making your script commercial: Read Chapter 8 in Seger
Workshop on script #2

Oct 27-30 Mid-Semester Break

Oct 31 Classes resume on Wednesday
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Nov 1  
Creating the myth  
Workshop on script #2  
Table reads

Nov 6/8  
Workshop on script #2  
Table reads  
Short script #2 due Thursday, Nov 8  
Ideas for script #3

Nov 13/15  
Film (TBA)  
Discussion/Exercise

Nov 20  
Workshop on script #3

Nov 21-25  
Thanksgiving Break

Nov 26  
Classes resume on Monday

Nov 27/29  
Workshop on script #3  
The Pitch

Dec 4/6  
Table reads  
Workshop on script #3  
Script #3 due Thursday, Dec 6

Dec 7  
Last Day of Classes

Dec 10/11/12/13  
Final Period—Pitch Sessions

General Guidelines and Policies

Come to class prepared and ready to participate. Your contributions are vital to the success of this class. I lower your grade one letter for each absence after your second in a Tuesday/Thursday class schedule. If you have an emergency situation, notify me as soon as possible. I do not accept “sick in room” excuses.

This is a writing workshop, so writing is the most important skill here. Therefore, grammatical errors will significantly lower your grade on any assignment. Any work filled with grammatical and technical errors cannot receive above a C.

The nature of the course and the subject matter dictate that you will have many deadlines; late work, if I accept it, will receive a lower grade.
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Turning in someone else’s work as your own constitutes plagiarism and will be punished according to the rules laid out in the Student Handbook. I report all instances of plagiarism to the Dean of the College.

In-class activities cannot be made up. I do not give makeup quizzes. Don’t ask. If you miss one, you receive a zero.

Turn off all cell phones and put them away before you come into class. If you are texting, tweeting, etc., I count you absent—because you’re not really engaged in the class. You are somewhere else.

Lab computers are to be used for workshopping, not checking your e-mail. If you’re looking at e-mail, or any other non-relevant content, I count you absent.

Purge the word “like” from your vocabulary, unless, of course, you are using it correctly. Saying “like” every other word makes you sound illiterate—not something you want to strive for in college.

Helping others is part of being in a workshop, so we will take some time to respond to each other’s work constructively and respectfully.