

Creating Movie Scripts

This is a syllabus from past semesters. It will not be the syllabus for Spring 2014, but is posted to give an idea what the class will be like. Please note that everything in it is subject to change – though the spirit of the course will remain the same. Spring 2014 will focus solely on creating feature film scripts. Contact me if you have other questions: noahz@utdallas.edu

Course Description:

This course will introduce you to feature film screenwriting. We will explore the basic theory and formal aspects of story structure, character development, use of conflict, scene writing and dialogue. We will then apply these basic dramatic principles to the development of your own original material.

Since much of the work of screenwriting is done before the actual drafting, this class will focus on the process of screenwriting: from the initial premise, through character exploration, to treatments and step-outlines, then writing your first draft. With the help of your peers in workshop, you will leave this course with a solid understanding of the fundamentals of screenwriting.

ALSO NOTE: the craft of screenwriting is learned through the critical examination of other screenplays and films, i.e.: we read screenplays in order to write screenplays. Just because you've seen the movie doesn't mean it's the same as the script. Screenplays are often used as blueprints for the films. As a result, if you don't read the script you are robbing yourself of learning how a writer communicates what she intends to be onscreen.

MECHANICS

Writing Requirements: By the end of the course, each student will have a completed treatment, step-outline, and completed first act of a feature-length screenplay.

Film Analysis: Each student will compose a filmography – a list of films/scripts relevant to their own project. Students will analyze at least one film from their filmography, focusing on character or plot.

Note: Film analysis is one of the greatest tools available to a screenwriter. It's strongly recommended that students continue to write analysis throughout the semester.

Assignments and Readings: All readings and assignments will be in your books or posted online.

Due Dates: Workshop assignments are to be posted to eLearning on the dates indicated.

If you have questions contact the professor for clarification.

Assignments must be typewritten. Must be 12 point courier. Must be in the proper format. Must be page-numbered. Most programs will properly format for you, but it is your responsibility to make sure your screenplay is correctly formatted.

No late work will be accepted. Each assignment should be treated like a submission to a producer or agent, and thus should look professional: properly formatted and error-free.

ATTENDANCE:

We have a lot to cover in this course – if you miss a single class (or are late to class) you'll miss something of great value. If absent or late, you are responsible for what was covered in class, including assignments: please contact two fellow students before resorting to the instructor.

You are expected to attend all lectures. Life happens sometimes, so you are allowed two absences. I don't require any notes or proof of emergency (I trust you have good reason). On the third absence you will receive one letter grade off. After a fourth, I recommend dropping the course. If you have extreme special circumstances, such as a heart operation or you are a nuclear physicist and are needed to avert a global catastrophe, then I suggest you make arrangements ahead of time with me for proper accommodations. You are expected to be proactive. After the fact excuses are not admissible.

RULES OF CRITICISM:

- Don't hold back. If something has problems, it has problems. Say so. However...
- Negative comments are a lot easier to make than positive ones. So, no matter how constructive your criticism is, try to match it with a compliment somewhere else.
- Identifying problems isn't enough -- also identify possible solutions. Don't simply say that a character or a scene doesn't work for you. Say why it doesn't, then tell us what changes to the character or scene would make it work for you.
- With regard to criticism of your own work: start developing a thick skin. Remember that your instructors and classmates are commenting on your scripts, not on you. Use their criticism to become a better writer.

GRADING:

In evaluating your work, I try to assess what's been learned and if it's reflected in your writing, i.e.: have you demonstrated an understanding of the dramatic concepts discussed in class, and is that understanding reflected in your own creative work? Your final grade will reflect the quality and sincerity of your efforts in this class.

Equally important is the level and quality of participation in class, as reflected by contribution to workshop.

There will be no tests or final exam. There is a final written project. Grades will be determined on a 100-point scale:

Premises:	5%
Format Assignment:	5%
Short Outline:	5%
Treatment:	10%
Film Analysis:	5%
Step Outline:	10%
Character Bio:	10%
Pgs 1 – 15:	10%
Pgs 15 – 30:	15%
Rewrite (pgs 1 – 30):	15%
Participation:	10%

SYLLABUS

This syllabus is subject to change.

Week	
1	Principles of Dramatic Writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to Screenwriting • The Basics: Character, Story, Structure • The Premise: Story Spine • Formatting
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to Write a Short Outline Workshop: Premises Due: 3-5 Premises, Formatting Assignment (Upload to eLearning Jan. 22) Reading: Walter – Chp. 1-3, 11, Howard – “The Story”
3	Three Act Structure: Putting It All Together <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The Godfather”: Beginnings, Middles, and Ends • Treatment: 5 Key Moments • How to do a Film Analysis Workshop: Group 1: Short Outlines Due: Short Outlines (Group 1 upload to Blackboard Jan. 29) Reading: Howard – “The Telling of the Story”, “What is Drama”, “The Three Acts” “The Godfather” script
4	Workshop: Group 2 & 3: Short Outlines Reading: Howard – “The Creation of Drama”, Walter – Chp. 4 – 7 Due: Group 1: Treatment, Group 2 & 3: Film Analysis
5	Exploring Character <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Schindler's List”: Dramatizing Character • Character Bio • Step Outlines Workshop: Group 1: Treatment Reading: “Schindler’s List” script, Howard – “Foundations”, Walter – Chp. 8 Due: Group 2: Treatment, Group 1: Film Analysis
6	Sequences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative to 5 Key Moments Workshop: Group 2: Treatment Reading: Howard – “Sequences” Due: Group 3: Treatment, Group 1 & 2: Character Bio
7	Scenes and Function <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anatomy of a Scene Workshop: Group 3: Treatment Reading: Walter – Chp. 10, Due: Group 1: Step Outlines, Group 3: Character Bio

8	Dialogue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dos and Don'ts Workshop: Group 1: Step Outlines Reading: Walter – Chp. 9 Due: Group 2: Step Outlines
9	Exposition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seriously, Show Don't Tell Workshop: Group 2: Step Outlines Reading: Howard – pgs 151 - 176, McKee – Chp. 15 (will be posted in eLearning) Due: Group 3: Step Outlines
10	Structure and Meaning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Idea vs. Counter Idea Workshop: Group 3: Step Outlines Reading: Howard p. 176 - 211 Due: Group 1: pgs. 1 - 15
11	Workshop: Group 1: pgs. 1 - 15 Reading: Howard – “Crucial Moments”, “Subplots” Due: Group 2: pgs. 1 - 15
12	Monomyth <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Universality in Story Workshop: Group 2: pgs. 1 - 15 Reading: Howard – “The Classical Screenplay Structure”, “Black Swan” script Due: Group 3: pgs. 1 - 15
13	Workshop: Group 3: pgs. 1 - 15 Reading: Howard – “Beyond Classical Dramatic Structure” Due: Group 1 & 2: pgs. 15 - 30
14	Workshop: Group 1 & 2: pgs. 15 - 30 Reading: “Out of Sight” script Due: Group 3: pgs. 15 - 30
15	Extra Credit Alternative Poetics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ends, Beginnings, Middles Workshop: Group 2 & 3: pgs. 15 - 30 Reading: Ramirez-Berg “Alternative Poetics” (will be posted on eLearning)
	Due: Rewrite Act I (pgs 1 – 30) Extra Credit: complete up until pgs 45

OFFICIAL UT DALLAS POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Please review the official UT Dallas Policies and Procedures online:

<http://coursebook.utdallas.edu/syllabus-policies/>