

Screenwriting

ENGL 208/308/408

Fall 2015

4-5:15 p.m., T,R (PL 213)

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"I think it's a beginning for authors to acknowledge that they are myth-makers and that, if they are widely read, will have an influence that will last for many years. I don't think there's a strong awareness of that now. And we have such a young culture that there is an opportunity to contribute wonderful new myths to it -- which will be accepted."

—Kurt Vonnegut, *interview with Walter James Miller, WNYC's Reader's Almanac (1974)*

Materials Required:

- Pencils, erasers
- Yellow legal pads
- Super-sticky Post-It Notes (normal size, fun colors optional)
- Spiral art pad (14" X 17" recommended)
- Celtx web-based screenwriting software (free, celtx.com), or Final Draft professional screenwriting software (academic version: \$89, finaldraft.com)

Required texts: *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein and *Save the Cat: The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need*, by Blake Snyder

Other Recommended Books:

Poetics, Aristotle, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell; *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, Syd Field; *Story Trumps Structure: Break the Rules of Writing Fiction to Create Stand-Out Stories*, Steven James; *The Essential Jung: Selected Writings*, Introduced by Anthony Storr

Course Description:

From concept, to research, to storyboard, to outline, to the feature film screenplay, we will strive to master the fundamental tools of classic three-act structure, learning the

practical storytelling skills employed by professional screenwriters, directors, editors, and producers. To achieve this, we will each work on our own unique adaptation of a single book: *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein.

I'll share lectures, lessons, movie clips, script pages, and personal experiences in a workshop-style atmosphere of analysis and critique. We will visually break down films, books, and scripts into their essential elements, write like our livelihoods depend on it, and explore every resource and technique that might help get to the beating heart of what makes great storytelling.

This course is tactile, visual, and old school in its approach to writing. We'll be doing A LOT of work with markers, pencils, paper, and our brains before ever opening that first computer file to create a title page for our screenplay.

Student Outcomes:

This is a nuts-and-bolts course in craft and structure, designed to deconstruct and demystify the screenwriting process. Like architects, engineers, and designers drawing up blueprints for a building, we'll study, discuss, and execute "big picture" elements of cinematic storytelling -- and like seasoned auto mechanics, we'll dirty our hands, yanking out scenes like clogged carburetors -- tinkering, grinding, polishing -- then reinstalling them till our scripts roar and purr.

By the end of the semester, you'll know exactly how professional-level screenplays are written, you'll have completed a feature screenplay draft to its midpoint (50 pages), and you'll be armed with the tools and confidence that will allow your cinematic storytelling voice to mature into its full potential.

What matters to me most is that, by the end of the semester, you will have mastered each step in the process of creating a professional-level feature screenplay. I'm confident your unique voice will emerge through practice, revision, and the occasional (and glorious) creative breakthrough. Screenwriters are puzzle-makers (meaning: we are puzzle-solvers, only in reverse order). We start with a big, clear picture of a story, then work backwards to dissect it into progressively smaller pieces. The final effect, when done well, can be one of mysterious complexity and invention.

Attendance and Participation:

Attendance and participation are *essential*. You get one free absence (if it's absolutely unavoidable), but still must do the assigned work. Please exchange phone numbers and/or emails with a classmate now. Attendance and participation counts for 20 percent of your final grade. More importantly, each class is designed in such a way that, if you miss one, you'll miss a ton of helpful material.

Grading and Evaluation:

	Grade %
Attendance & Participation	20%
Concept & Elevator Pitches	10%
Beat Sheet	10%
Storyboard	10%
Sequence Outline	10%
Treatment	10%
Acts I & II (to midpoint, 50 pages)	30%
TOTAL	100%

Methods of Assessing Student Outcomes:

In my view, each step in a successful screenwriter's process is dependent upon the creative step that precedes it. Together, we'll engage with the lessons, and the writing, in a way that assures everyone keeps pace, and that each step is completed on schedule -- resulting in five essential foundational materials and a feature film screenplay written to its midpoint (50 pages).

Each element of this course is critical to achieve real screenwriting understanding and success. To earn a grade of A, you must: 1) compile your Final Portfolio, step-by-step, by completing each assignment from Concept Pitches through writing to your feature screenplay's midpoint (50 pages); 2) attend every class (one absence allowed without penalty); 3) contribute regularly, thoughtfully, and respectfully to our workshop critiques and discussions; 4) always present your finished work in professional format, taking great care to make it error-free. Anything short of those expectations will result in a reduction in your final grade.

This is a class for the pragmatic storyteller. It is not primarily focused on the artistry of your voice. It is focused on your effort and commitment to learn the screenwriter's craft. I want you to achieve this goal so,

please, always ask me for whatever help you need along the way.

Schedule (subject to change):

Week One

Introductions. Course goals and format. Reviewing the syllabus. Syllabus class feedback exercise and Q&A.

Read *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein. Determine genre of *The Giving Tree*.

My visual/lecture presentation on classic **three-act structure**. Discussion and questions.

Week Two

What is at the core of "story"?

Adaptation. What are the "major dramatic beats?" Structure, Imagination, and Research.

What is a "Beat Sheet"? Beat out *The Giving Tree*.

Think about story concepts for your own feature screenplay. Come to next class prepared to verbally pitch three unique screenplay project ideas (under 100 words each).

Everyone will pitch three concepts for his/her screenplay project, with "working titles." You'll receive feedback in selecting your screenplay project for the semester. Review Beat Sheet structure.

Week Three

Screenplays are structure. Beats, Scenes, Sequences, and Acts.

Beat Sheet due. Beat Sheets critique, workshop, and exercises. Lesson and workshop discussion focused on breaking down the elements of the first half of a feature film storyboard.

Lesson and discussion on feature film storyboard structure.

Week Four

The Storyboard (Acts I & II, to midpoint).

Act I (Thesis). "Once upon a time... And then, one day..." Ordinary world established. The "individual" vs. the "system." Intro principal characters. The Setup: establishing the hero's "work, home, and play." Plotting from catalyst to the break into Act II.

Act II (Anti-thesis, to midpoint). The Love Story, and other B-plots. The hero's "strange new world." Delivering the promise of the premise, inventing set pieces, and plotting through complicated conflict and rising tension to the story's Supreme Ordeal (midpoint), when "want" becomes "need."

Week Five

The Storyboard (Acts II & III, from midpoint to end).

Act II (Anti-thesis, from midpoint). Plotting how desperation grows, ideas fail, villains gain ground, consequences for earlier decisions, the hero hits rock bottom, is resurrected, and break into Act III.

Act III (Synthesis). Making a plan. The Five-Step Finale. Climax, Coda, and Epilogue.

Week Six

Using the Storyboard to build the Sequence Outline.

Week Seven

Using the Sequence Outline to write the Screenplay. Technical aspects of form, format, and terminology from "Fade In" to "End Credits". Narrative voice. Style.

Week Eight

Action and Description. Setting. Time and Place. Narrative devices.

Week Nine

Character and Dialogue. Character names. Relationships.

Week Ten

Conflict, Tension, and Desire. Staying focused on the "tangible" goal of the story.

Week Eleven

Values, Purpose, and Personal Philosophy. Staying focused on the "spiritual" goal of the story.

Week Twelve

One-on-one creative discussions -- to be scheduled with me in time blocks, in my office, according to everyone's schedules.

At this point in the semester, now that you know the rules of structure, experiment with them. Remember: story structure is a tool, not an oppressor.

Recommended reading: *Story Trumps Structure: Break the Rules of Writing Fiction to Create Stand-Out Stories*, Steven James.

Recommended films: "Memento", "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind", "Inception", or any other film that supposedly ignores story structure. Try to map its underlying three-act structure.

Week Thirteen

Writing the Film Treatment.

Lessons and discussions on applying the screenwriter's craft to television, the Internet, graphic novels, games, and other media and entertainment.

Revise and polish full screenplay while considering notes, workshop feedback, and one-on-one discussions. Prepare to deliver a verbal 3-5 minute pitch of your film -- as though to a studio executive with the power to greenlight your project.

Week Fourteen

Screenplay pitching session with **guest industry professional** (in person or via Skype), followed by a candid discussion about working in the industry as a professional screenplay or television writer -- including representation, pitching, networking, etc.

Prepare all semester materials for **Final Portfolio submission**.

Week Fifteen

Last class and party. Final class discussion and Q&A.

Final Portfolios due.

Your **Final Portfolio** for Screenwriting: ENGL 208/308/408 will contain:

1. Your three (3) original **Concept Pitches** (under 100 words each)
2. Your full screenplay **Beat Sheet**
3. Your full **Storyboard** (a photo is okay)
4. Your full screenplay **Sequence Outline**
5. Your **Feature Screenplay** written to its midpoint (50 pages)
6. Your **Treatment** (three pages, 750 words)
7. Your final, 1-2 sentence **Logline** (aka "elevator pitch")

Student Conduct

Attendance is *essential*. You get one free absence (if it's absolutely unavoidable), but you still gotta do the assigned work. Please exchange phone numbers and/or emails with a classmate now.

This is a workshop-style class so regular, thoughtful, courteous participation in our lively, intelligent discussions is required for each of us to get the most benefit from the experience. Your grade is based 10 percent on class participation, and I'll always do my best to moderate topics, steering discourse to stay focused on the topic at hand. Please, don't chew gum or screw around with your cell phone, laptop, Google Glass, iWatch, Rubick's Cube -- or engage in any other rude, distracting behavior. I trust that could've gone without mentioning.

It is a student's responsibility to be aware of assignment deadlines.

Computer problems, power failures, and Internet difficulties are not excuses for missed assignments. Have back-up plans for possible technical glitches.

This is a course in writing so, yes, spelling, grammar, and correct formatting are very important and count toward your final letter grade. Think and write like a pro and, before long, you'll be one.

Further Reading:

Books

Plot & Structure: Techniques and exercises for crafting a plot that grips readers from start to finish, by James Scott Bell

Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting, Robert McKee

The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers (3rd Edition), Christopher Vogler
Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles, Steven Pressfield
Memories, Dreams, Reflections, C.G. Jung and Aniela Jaffe

Screenplays

"Small Apartments"
 "Casablanca"
 "American Beauty"
 "Rushmore"
 "Juno"
 "Michael Clayton"
 "Little Miss Sunshine"

Films to Watch and Read:

"Small Apartments", Chris Millis
 "Casablanca", Julius & Philip Epstein and Howard Koch
 "To Kill a Mockingbird", Horton Foote
 "Chinatown", Robert Towne
 "Network", Paddy Chayefsky
 "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid", William Goldman
 "Monty Python and the Holy Grail", Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Terry Gilliam, Michael Palin, Terry Jones
 "Jaws", Peter Benchley and Carl Gottlieb; John Milius (uncredited)
 "Ordinary People", Alvin Sargent
 "Thelma & Louise", Callie Khouri
 "Moonstruck", John Patrick Shanley
 "The Silence of the Lambs", Ted Tally
 "Pulp Fiction", Quentin Tarrantino
 "Toy Story", Andrew Stanton, Joss Whedon, Joel Cohen, Alec Sokolow (screenplay); John Lasseter, Pete Docter, Joe Ranft (Original Story by)
 "Fargo", Joel & Ethan Coen
 "American Beauty", Alan Ball
 "Little Miss Sunshine", Michael Arndt
 "Tiny Furniture", Lena Dunham

More Recommended Films:

Original

"Citizen Kane", Herman Mankiewicz and Orson Wells
 "Star Wars", George Lucas
 "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial", Melissa Mathison

"Unforgiven", David Webb Peoples
 "Goodfellas", Nicholas Pileggi and Martin Scorsese
 "When Harry Met Sally", Nora Ephron
 "Do the Right Thing", Spike Lee
 "Boyz in the Hood", John Singleton
 "The Big Lebowski", Joel & Ethan Coen
 "The Blair Witch Project", Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sanchez
 "Juno", Diablo Cody
 "Michael Clayton", Tony Gilroy
 "The 40-Year-Old Virgin", Judd Apatow & Steve Carell
 "The Hangover", John Lucas & Scott Moore
 "Bridesmaids", Kristin Wiig & Annie Mumolo
 "Birdman", Alejandro González Iñárritu & Nicolás Giacobone
 & Alexander Dinelaris & Armando Bo

Adapted

"The Wizard of Oz", Noel Langley and Florence Ryerson and
 Edgar Alan Woolf
 "Sideways", Alexander Payne & Jim Taylor
 "Being There", Jerzy Kosinski
 "The Shining", Stanley Kubrick and Diane Johnson
 "The Godfather", Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola
 "Apocalypse Now", John Milius
 "The Princess Bride", William Goldman
 "Sense and Sensibility", Emma Thompson
 "Wonder Boys", Steve Kloves
 "Adaptation", Charlie Kaufman
 "Mean Girls", Tina Fey
 "Precious", Geoffrey Fletcher
 "Moneyball", Steven Zaillian, Aaron Sorkin; Stan Chervin
 (story)

Oscar-nominated female screenwriters:

Jane Campion ("The Piano"), Sophia Coppola ("Lost in
 Translation"), Fran Walsh & Philippa Boyens ("Lord of the
 Rings" trilogy), Julie Delphy ("Before Sunset"), Tamara
 Jenkins ("The Savages"), Susanna Grant ("Erin Brockovich"),
 Nia Vardalos ("My Big Fat Greek Wedding"), Nancy Oliver
 ("Lars and the Real Girl")

Academic Accommodations:

In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and
 Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, students with a
 documented disability are eligible for support services and
 accommodations. If a student wishes to request an accommodation,
 please contact the Director of Academic Support Services, Henry
 Conover, at (775) 831-1314 x7534, hconover@sierranevada.edu
 or go to the OASIS offices on the third floor of Prim Library

within the first week of the semester.

The SNC E-mail System:

The SNC e-mail system is the official communication vehicle among students, faculty members and administrative staff and is designed to protect the confidentiality of student information as required by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 Act (FERPA). Students should check their college e-mail accounts daily during the school year. Students have a right to forward their SNC e-mail to another e-mail account (for example, @hotmail or @gmail). However, confidentiality of student information protected by FERPA cannot be guaranteed for SNC e-mail forwarded to an outside vendor. Having e-mail redirected does not absolve a student from the responsibilities associated with official communication sent to his or her SNC e-mail account.

Faculty/Student Honor Code:

The faculty of SNC believes students must be held to high standards of integrity in all aspects of college life in order to promote the educational mission of the College and to encourage respect for the rights of others. Each student brings to the SNC community unique skills, talents, values and experiences which, when expressed within the community, contribute to the quality of the educational environment and the growth and development of the individual. Students share with members of the faculty, administration and staff the responsibility for creating and maintaining an environment conducive to learning and personal development, where actions are guided by mutual respect, integrity, responsibility and trust. The faculty and students alike must make diligent efforts to ensure high standards are upheld by their colleagues and peers as well as themselves. Therefore faculty and students accept responsibility for maintaining these standards at Sierra Nevada College and are obligated to comply with its regulations and procedures, which they are expected to read and understand.

Consequences for Violating the Honor Code:

SNC students and faculty share the responsibility for maintaining an environment of academic honesty. Thus, all are responsible for knowing and abiding by the SNC Faculty/Student Honor Code published in the current SNC Catalog. Faculty are responsible for presenting the honor code and consequences for violating it to students at the start of their classes AND for reporting all incidences of academic dishonesty to the Provost. Students are responsible for knowing what constitutes cheating, plagiarism and fabrication, and refraining from these and other forms of academic dishonesty. Violations of the honor code

become part of a student's academic record.

SNC's Disciplinary Sanctions for Honor Code Violations:

1st Offense: Student receives a zero for assignment/exam and counseling with faculty on the honor code, consequences for violating the honor code, and the value of academic honesty in learning.

2nd Offense: Student fails course and receives counseling with faculty on the honor code, consequences for violating the honor code, and the value of academic honesty in learning.

3rd Offense: Student is expelled.

The SNC Mission Statement:

Sierra Nevada College graduates will be educated to be scholars of and contributors to a sustainable world. Sierra Nevada College combines the liberal arts and professional preparedness through an interdisciplinary curriculum that emphasizes entrepreneurial thinking and environmental, social, economic and educational sustainability. Core themes are Liberal Arts, Entrepreneurial Thinking, Professional Preparedness and Sustainability.