

## **Screenwriting**

ENGL 208/308/408

Spring 2016

4-5:15 p.m., T,R (PA 211)

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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](http://celtx.com)), or Final Draft professional screenwriting software (academic version: \$89, [finaldraft.com](http://finaldraft.com))

**Required texts:** *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.

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.

### **An Up-Front Note on Attendance:**

Yes, I notice when you're not there. For a high letter grade in this course, attendance is *essential*. You must inform the **professor** beforehand when you expect to be

absent. Random, unexcused absences will hurt your overall grade for the course. Also, if you miss class, you are still responsible for completing the assigned work and turning it in on time. Please exchange phone numbers and/or emails with a classmate now.

Each class is designed in such a way that, if you miss one, you'll miss a ton of helpful material.

<b>Grading and Evaluation:</b>	<b>Grade %</b>
Attendance & Participation	30%
Concept & Elevator Pitch	5%
Beat Sheet	5%
Storyboard	10%
Outline	10%
Treatment/Synopsis	10%
Screenplay (Acts I & II to midpoint, 50 pages)	30%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>

#### **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.

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

The key elements of screenwriting.

Schedule one-on-one creative discussions in my office, according to everyone's schedules, to set goals and expectations for the semester.

### **Week Two**

What is at the core of "story"? What's the "spine?" The "through-line?" "The red thread?"

What are the major dramatic beats of a story written for film? Structure, Imagination, and Research.

What is a "Beat Sheet"?

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 build to form a Screenplay.

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 Outline.

#### **Week Seven (Mid-Term)**

Technical aspects of form, format, and terminology from "Fade In" to "End Credits". Narrative voice. Style.

**\*\*Materials due for mid-term: 1) Three concept pitches, 2) Beat Sheet, 3) Storyboard, 4) Outline (progress TBD).**

#### **Week Eight**

Using the Outline to write the Screenplay.

Writing the screenplay. Act I.

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

Using the Outline to write the Screenplay.

Writing Act II.

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

Act I pages due for review (25 pages minimum to the Break into Act II).

### Week Twelve

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

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.

Acts I & II pages due for review (50 pages minimum to the midpoint).

In-class writing exercise: Writing the Film Treatment.

### Week Fourteen

Polishing the pitch: 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, television, or digital media writer -- including representation, pitching, networking, etc.

Prepare semester materials for Final Portfolio submission. Final discussion, Q&A, and in-class writing sessions.

Last class and party.

### **\*\*Final Portfolios due.**

Your **Final Portfolio** for Screenwriting Workshop 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 **Outline**
5. Your **Feature Screenplay** written to its midpoint (50 pages)
6. Your **Treatment/Synopsis** (three pages, approx. 750 words)
7. Your final, 1-2 sentence **Pitch** (aka "elevator pitch")

### **Week Fifteen**

FINALS WEEK.

### **Student Conduct**

Our Tuesday and Thursday meetings are in the "workshop-style" format so, to get the most benefit from the learning experience, regular, thoughtful, and courteous engagement in our lively discussions is not just encouraged – it's *required*. Your grade is based 40 percent on Attendance, Participation and the use of your Writer's Notebook, so I pledge to always do my best to present challenging material, spark interesting discussion, moderate difficult topics, and steer our discourse to stay focused on the aspects most relevant to our purposes.

Please don't chew gum, or mess around with your cell phone, laptop, tablet, Google Glass, iWatch, Rubick's Cube -- or engage in any other rude, distracting behaviors. Show respect and ye shall receive it.

This class is *old school*. When necessary, I will provide handouts to accompany important lessons. Any in-class notes will be taken by hand in your Writer's Notebook, not typed

into a device. Video and/or audio recording of class is not allowed – unless approved for special in-class purposes.

**\*\*\*DO NOT THINK YOU WILL SPEND OUR TIME TOGETHER STARING INTO YOU OPEN LAPTOP AND/OR CHECKING YOUR MOBILE DEVICE.\*\*\***

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* (3<sup>rd</sup> 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  
 "Spotlight", Tom McCarthy, Josh Singer  
 "Creed", Ryan Coogler, Aaron Covington

#### 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](mailto: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:

1<sup>st</sup> 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.

2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

3<sup>rd</sup> 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.