

Introduction to Screenwriting

WRCR6212

Course Outline

Description:

During this eight week course, students of any skill level will learn how to create a successful feature film screenplay. Students learn screenwriting techniques by exploring the habits of working screenwriters, working with proven tools of the trade, and receiving tips and tricks designed to help anyone find the perfect balance between your unique artistic voice and the proper technical disciplines required by the film industry.

Much of the teaching points are presented in the form of “what to avoid” and “what not to do” instructional presentations and open discussions which give each student a very pragmatic and often amusing understanding of the typical pitfalls that would result in a “bad” screenplay.

There will also be weekly practical workshops that require each student to create a complete screenplay concept, step-by-step, using templates and formulas employed by industry professionals.

If you love movies and you love to write or you’re a simply a novice that wants to learn how, take this course, and set yourself on the path to becoming the next Tarantino!

Course Goals:

Students will learn the how to write feature film screenplays and discover the perfect balance between the proper technical disciplines required by the film industry and their own unique voice as an artist.

The course is a combination of insightful dialogue and hands-on workshops focused on STORY, CHARACTER, STRUCTURE, PLOT, GENRE, DIALOGUE, storytelling DEVICES, THEMES, SUBTEXT, proper FORMATTING, REWRITES and EDITING and finally, how to PITCH your screenplay to industry professionals.

Course Objectives:

After the eight weeks are complete, each student will be well on his or her way to writing a complete FIRST DRAFT. Using a structural template created in class, each student will have laid out a complete screenplay of their own, in bullet point form, develop complete character profiles of key cast, and detail several key scenes with dialogue. They will gain a working understanding of what makes a great screenplay and how to best use the insights and basic building blocks employed by industry greats.

Attendance Requirements:

Students must miss no more than two classes to receive a completion for this course. A grade report can

be printed from myWCS.

Code of Student Conduct:

The purpose of the Code of Student Conduct is to define the general standard of conduct expected of students registered at Western University, provide examples of behavior that constitutes a breach of this standard of conduct, provide examples of sanctions that may be imposed, and set out the disciplinary procedures that the University will follow. For the complete Code of Student Conduct: <http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/board/code.pdf>.

Course Schedule:

Weekly Course Outlines:

Week One: Motivations and Expectations The Students Will...

1. Introduce themselves to the class; discuss their goals, and what led them to our classroom.
2. Explore and understand the screenwriters place in the movie-making process.
3. Explore the culture of the filmmaking industry (HOLLYWOOD), discuss what to expect and how best to enter the field as a novice.
4. Learn the habits, tricks and tools that are used by successful industry professionals.
5. Take part in an exercise designed to identify what each student enjoys most about the films they watch and why.
6. Accept a "HOMEWORK" assignment designed to prepare them for the next class where they will begin the scriptwriting process by choosing a "STORY".

Week Two: Story The Students Will...

1. Study the meaning of the word STORY.
2. Learn the difference between ORIGINAL and ADAPTED works.
3. Explore the primary goal of the writer of any story.
4. Learn how to answer the question "What is it about?"
5. Define the word GENRE and explore its effect on story.
6. Identify story elements that would "RED FLAG" a producer.
7. Discuss and explore the importance of SURPRISING your reader.
8. Explore BELIEVABILITY vs. AUTHENTICITY.
9. Begin making choices on the scope of their story using 3 categories of SCOPE OPTIONS and exploring how each option will affect their story.
10. Choose an ending for their story using one of the FOUR CONCLUSION TEMPLATES and identify why that is an important FIRST step.
11. Explore the 2 categories of DYNAMIC STORY OPTIONS and the options within each.
12. Finally, using all of the options explored, students will begin making choices and laying out their story within a fill-in-the-blanks handout.

Week Three: Character The Students Will...

1. Learn the definition of the word "character" and understand its meaning within the context of screenwriting.
2. Explore the attributes of Hollywood's favorite film characters.

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3. Learn what defining attributes make a great character.
4. Discuss the categories and functions of characters within a screenplay.
5. Learn the importance of research and its effect on building “believable” and credible characters.
6. Explore the importance of a good backstory and how it can and should inform creative choices made during the story development phase.
7. Discuss what a “catalyst” is, how that helps define a character and how to use catalysts for change at regular intervals throughout your story.
8. Define and understand a character “arc”.
9. Explore the critical need for a lead character to make choices, and why the more often it happens and the more difficult/higher stakes the choices are, the better.
10. Design a thorough character outline using several popular character development worksheets and profiling methods.

Week Four: Structure **The Students Will...**

1. Learn the foundations of the universal three-act paradigm through Aristotle’s “Poetics”.
2. Discuss the tactics involved in breaking a three act paradigm into four sections.
3. Study the function of and necessary ingredients of an ideal act one, or “Protasis”.
4. Study the function of and necessary ingredients of an ideal act two (Epitasis) - part one.
5. Study the function of and necessary ingredients of an ideal act two - part two.
6. Study the function of and necessary ingredients of an ideal act three, or “Denouement”.
7. Create a personal, fill-in-the-blanks, poster-sized screenplay template and, using index cards, mark on the template what the required story “ingredients” are by name, where they should appear on the template timeline, and specifically what form they will take within each student’s screenplay.

Week Five: Plot and Dialogue **The Students Will...**

1. Learn the effect that genre has on story and specifically, plot.
2. Discuss the importance of choosing the most interesting and dramatically effective way of telling their story and how it may involve fundamental changes from their original vision to work for a greater audience.
3. Explore the effects of a screenwriter’s personal point of view and how that can evolve into a distinct and quantifiable “style”.
4. Identify several ways to ensure a healthy pace and explore the devastating effects of a pace that is too slow.
5. Learn the difference between a plot, sub-plot, and mini-plot, and how best to use each category within a screenplay.
6. Use the template built to successfully track each plot and ensure their ideal development within their own screenplays.
7. Study the successful use of dialogue and its effect on story, plot, character and genre.
8. Study the use of subtext and its ability to enrich every element of a screenplay.
9. Learn the A-B dialogue technique and use their own screenplay or a favorite to explore its effectiveness.
10. Explore the “10 Commandments” of good dialogue and take part in several exercises designed to create engaging and authentic dialogue that will “fuel” any screenplays.
11. Learn the dangers of monologuing/extraneous exposition, and study its devastating effects on a screenplay.
12. Study the best practices and tips of screenwriting pros on how to “bury exposition” within dialogue.
13. Explore tactics designed to give each character a unique dialogue “voice”.

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Week Six: Devices and Themes **The Students Will...**

1. Study, list and understand the most popular cliched devices employed in creating Hollywood's most popular scripts including the "Red Herring", "Chekov's Gun", "Deus ex Machina", the "Maguffin", the "Twist", "Collateral Death", the "Red Shirt", "and many more.
2. Study and list the use of more classic, structural devices such as Juxtaposition, Foreshadowing, the Running Gag, the Narrator, Imagery, Immediacy, Tension, Rhyming Scenes, the Rule of Threes, and many more.
3. Using the structure template and customized index cards, create plot points incorporating popular devices and place them on their own screenplay timeline to help develop the story, plot or character arcs.
4. Engage in a discussion exploring "movies" vs. "films".
5. Define the word "theme" and explore its many uses within the context of a screenplay.
6. Study the power of theme and its ability to help fully realize a story's potential.
7. Explore the various types of themes often employed in screenplays, visual and otherwise.
8. Using the favorite film first listed in class one, list the themes explored in that popular film.
9. Discuss/explore "Tone" and its relationship with both genre and theme.

Week Seven: Formatting **The Students Will...**

1. Engage in an intensive two-hour class focused solely on the specifics of proper screenplay formatting including...
2. a proper Cover Page
3. First Page anatomy
4. Transitions
5. Slug Lines
6. Scene Direction and noted Camera Angles
7. Dialogue
8. Montages
9. Sound and Music
10. Entrances and Exits
11. Character Description
12. Parentheticals
13. Capitalization
14. Pauses, Beats and Ellipses
15. and many more.

Week Eight: Scenes, Rewrites, Editing and THE PITCH! **The Students Will...**

1. Study the anatomy of an ideal scene and identify the critical elements required.
2. Learn the basics of an effective scene analysis and use the principles studied to break down one or more of the scenes within their own screenplays.
3. Study the "Boyle Sheet" method of scene development and use it on one of the scenes from their own screenplays.
4. Discuss the profound effect of location on a scene's effectiveness and explore the choices made within their own screenplay.
5. Discuss and explore good editing and rewrite practices employed by successful screenwriters.
6. Examine the "Words to Cut List", why the words are counterproductive and how avoiding the use of such words will improve a script.
7. Explore the Syd Field "Six Rewrites" and how each stage is a critical part of any screenplay's development.

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8. Discuss the “zero tolerance” attitude towards spelling, grammar and syntax and it’s devastating effect on your screenplay and your personal credibility as a screenwriter.
9. Explore and engage in several exercises designed to help any screenwriter not only “pitch” their concept, but also speak effectively about it:
10. Compose a polished one-page synopsis.
11. Compose a polished one line synopsis or “pitch line”
12. Compose a polished and effective poster “tag line”.
13. And explore the effectiveness of either filming themselves “pitching” or engaging in Pitchfests and other face-to-face exchanges designed to develop each student's skills as a “playmaker”.

*NOTE: At the conclusion of this 8 week course, each student will have collected and studied a broad selection of new tools and techniques designed to help create a technically successful and artistically engaging screenplay which - by class eight - will be laid out in a very detailed manner on the template timeline constructed in class, complete with a minimum of 40 story beats (scenes) authored by the student and noted on properly arranged index cards. Several key scenes will have been more fully developed and each student will be ready to proceed with either a complete first draft or the first rewrite (second draft) if they’ve had time available between classes to do so.