

## **DMA 495-02 Special Topics: Fiction Screenwriting (3 units)**

MW 8:30-9:45 AM (SBS F225)

**Instructor:** Chad Gervich chadgervich@yahoo.com  
Office Location – LIB B107 Office Hours MW 9:45-10:15am

**Course Description** – Welcome to “Fiction Screenwriting!” This course is designed to introduce you to the fundamental skills of conceiving, developing, outlining, and writing a narrative film, as well as a short PSA.

Over the next 16 weeks, you’ll conceive, develop, outline and write two scripts that may be used for production projects later in the program.

While screenwriting and PSA-writing are two very different mediums and forms, we’ll be working on them concurrently. We’ll spend the first 6-7 weeks studying the creative elements of storytelling, looking at examples in both traditional narrative films as well as produced PSA’s. We’ll then apply what we’ve learned to our own projects, outlining and writing our own short films and our own PSA’s for actual non-profit organizations.

As you write and learn, we will use techniques and processes used by professional TV and screenwriters: generating beat sheets, character descriptions, outlines, joke punches, etc.

Also, because writing (whether for film, TV, or PSA’s) is intensely collaborative, you’ll not only be expected to write and advance your own work, but to give critical feedback and notes to your classmates as well.

Sixteen weeks from now, you’ll leave this class with the completed draft of a pilot script... a deeper understanding of how movies are written (and rewritten)... and, most importantly, stronger storytelling skills, writing chops, and a firmer grasp of your own unique voice and vision.

**Prerequisites/Required Texts:** There are no prerequisites or required textbooks for this course.

**Class Projects** - students will complete the following ten class projects throughout the semester:

- 1) Rough-draft PSA script
- 2) Final-draft PSA script (Final)
- 3) Personal “Voice” document
- 4) Crafting premise lines and emotional lenses for 2-5 short films
- 5) Character descriptions
- 6) Narrative deconstruction of a short story
- 7) Beat sheet for a 10-page screenplay
- 8) Detailed outline for 10-page screenplay
- 9) Rough-draft for a 10-page narrative script
- 10) Final-Draft 10-page narrative script (Final)

**Final Projects:** This class has two big projects which will be due on the last day of class:

- 1) A final script for a 30-second PSA
- 2) A final script for a 10-minute narrative short film

**How the Class Works** – I’ve divided this class into units, with each unit encompassing another step in the screenwriting process. Each week, we’ll have two classes (Monday and Wednesday). Most weeks work like this:

On Wednesday, we’ll discuss the next step in the screenwriting process. This may involve viewing and analyzing various short films or clips, in-class discussions or writing exercises, etc. You’ll then receive an assignment designed to advance both your script and your understanding of the screenwriting process. **This assignment will usually be due the following Monday.**

On the following Monday, we’ll workshop your assignment in class. Each workshop session will begin with our discussing 1-2 students’ work in front of the entire class. We’ll then break into smaller groups to workshop, critique, and offer constructive feedback to each of your group-mates’ scripts. (There are a few occasions when we’ll also be workshopping on Wednesday.)

### **Workshops/Feedback**

In our first class session, we’ll divide the class into groups: Group A, B, C, etc., depending on how many students we have. (There will be 3-4 people per group.) The group you are in will be your “Workshop Group” for the remainder of the semester; these are the people who will be reviewing and critiquing your work each week — and whose work you’ll be reviewing and critiquing as well.

**WHEN HOMEWORK IS DUE** — You must email your work (as a Word doc, Final Draft doc, or PRF) to your fellow group-mates and me 48 hours before class.

In other words, if it’s a Monday morning class, your work must be emailed by 8:30 Saturday morning; if it’s a Wednesday class, your work must be emailed by 8:30 Monday morning.

If your work is not received by 48 hours before class (not 8:45, not 9:00, but 8:30), you will lose 10 points on that project’s final grade, and you may forfeit your chance to share or receive feedback.

It is also your responsibility to read your group-mates’ work before each workshop session... and to come to class with thoughtful, constructive criticism. Thus, part of your weekly homework is to peruse your classmates’ work and come prepared to discuss.

### **How Homework Works:**

Most weeks, you will have a homework assignment due the following week. Some quick rules regarding homework:

- When you turn in homework, please bring to class 1 HARD COPY... and EMAIL ME ONE COPY IN WORD OR FINAL DRAFT OR AS A PDF ([chadgervich@yahoo.com](mailto:chadgervich@yahoo.com)). (There will also be times when you're required to bring hard copies for everyone.)
- Hard copies must be turned in *at the beginning of each class*.
- Any assignment submitted late will result in an automatic deduction of 10 points on the final grade for the project.
- Each unexcused absence results in a deduction of 2 points and each late arrival results in a deduction of 1 point from the student's Participation grade unless excused for illness or personal emergency by proper documentation. If you're going to be late—or have to miss class—TELL ME AHEAD OF TIME. (If you tell me ahead of time, you're in the clear.)
- You are writers. I expect excellent grammar, syntax, and spelling. I will grade down for errors.
- Script pages should be in proper script format. I'd recommend using Final Draft, but you can also use Word or Pages if you have a workable screenplay template. You can also submit a PDF. NO HANDWRITTEN WORK!!

**Student Learning Outcomes** – By the end of the course, each student will be able to:

- 1) Identify, conceptualize, develop, and write a focused and purposeful script for a 30-second PSA.
- 2) Conceive, develop, and break a 10-minute narrative film concept.
- 3) Craft an effective outline for a 10-minute narrative film project, focusing on story logic, character wants, action and conflict, and character transformation.
- 4) Give, receive, and implement constructive creative feedback identifying holes and flaws in a narrative screenplay.
- 5) Complete the second draft of a 10-minute narrative screenplay
- 6) Understand the fundamental building blocks of narrative screenwriting and storytelling, including tangible and emotional wants, action and conflict, and character transformation.

<b><u>Grading Criteria:</u></b>	(100 points total)
Rough-draft PSA	10 points
Final (PSA Script)	25 points
Rough-draft 10-minute script	15 points
Final 10-minute script	40 points
Class Participation	<u>10 points</u> ( <i>Five absences and/or 10 late arrivals = no credit for participation</i> )
<b>Total</b>	<b>100 points</b>

**Grading Scale:**

- A (100-92 pts)
- A- (91-90 pts)
- B+ (89-88 pts)
- B (87-82 pts)
- B- (81-80 pts)
- C+ (79-78 pts)
- C (77-72 pts)
- C- (71-70 pts)
- D+ (69-68 pts)
- D (67-60 pts)
- F (59-0 pts)

**Late Submission Policy:** Any assignment submitted late will result in an automatic deduction of 10 points on the final grade for the project.

**Extra Credit Policy:** There will be no extra credit available in this course.

**Statement of Grading:**

When I grade your projects at the end of the semester, I grade not based on whether or not I “like” something, but on how well you seem to be understanding and implementing the principles, processes, and techniques we’ve learned in class. Even if I don’t “like” your story, can I see rock-solid story logic in your beat sheet? Are your characters well-motivated and three-dimensional? Is your draft improving thanks to rewriting techniques and punch-up? Are you listening to, thinking about, and effectively implementing notes?

Also, I don’t believe in giving A’s for effort. I give A’s for hard work, and evidence that you can understand and successfully wield the tools we’ve been using in class. If you’re not fully understanding something, or you feel stuck or blocked, GET HELP! Come talk to me! Talk to your classmates! Figure out where you’re stumbling and talk to someone about how to grow and get better.

**Academic Integrity:** Consult the University Catalog section titled “Academic Integrity” for campus policy on cheating and plagiarism. Cheating and plagiarism will result in automatic failure of the course and possible expulsion from the University.

**Disabled Student Services:** Students with disabilities are encouraged to consult the University Catalog for information on the *Student disAbility Resource Center* [dss@csudh.edu](mailto:dss@csudh.edu) (310-243-3660) . Students requiring assistance with exams or other course work can utilize these services.

### **Computer/Information Literacy Expectations for Students in this Class**

1. Use the university email system (Toromail). In order to receive course information, assignments, and announcements, you must have an e-mail account which you can access daily (Campus accounts can be arranged for free).
2. Use Blackboard
3. Use a word processing program for writing assignments (e.g., Microsoft Word).
4. Be able to access assigned websites through the internet
5. For additional information about computing on campus, including tutorials, students should go to:
  - <http://www.csudh.edu/infotech/labs>
  - [http://www.csudh.edu/infotech/student\\_index.shtml](http://www.csudh.edu/infotech/student_index.shtml)
  - <http://www.lynda.com>

### **Class Environment**

Students should minimize potential classroom disruptions by:

- **NO PHONES!** All cell phones and other personal electronic devices should be turned off and stored in a pocket or bag during class. Laptops used for taking notes are the only electronic devices allowed in class, but there is a **one-strike policy**—if you are caught using your laptop for anything but coursework, you lose permission to use your laptop in class.
- **NO FOOD or DRINKS!** Consumption of food and beverages in our classrooms, television studio and production labs is NOT allowed at any time. Food and beverages must be stored outside of class and labs.

Any disruptive behavior will result in a deduction of **5 points** from the student’s Participation grade as well as the student being asked to leave for the duration of the class period.

**Additional Course Requirements:**

Your feedback is invaluable to your colleagues. It is a major part of whether or not we have a successful class. Therefore, you are expected to actively listen, contribute and analyze during class discussions.

Also, when discussing each other's work, or working as a writers room, I expect you to be collaborative, cooperative, and supportive of your fellow classmates and writers.

This doesn't mean you can't criticize and point out flaws in each other's work. You can; in fact, this is part of your job in the writers room. But you should always be criticizing kindly, compassionately, and constructively. In other words, we don't criticize to tear work down; we criticize to make work better.

There's a rule in every writers room: *you never point out a flaw without offering a fix, a solution or improvement.* Abide by this rule. Not only will it make you a friendlier, warmer collaborator, but by offering examples of solutions or improvements, you'll do a better job of illuminating the flaw you meant to point out.

Which also brings me to the all-important WRITERS ROOM CREED:

***What happens in the room  
Stays in the room.***

As in all writers rooms, you and your classmates will be sharing — both out loud and in your writing — intensely personal and private thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This is what makes good writing. But in order to go to these places, to be able to use them to create beautiful art, we must know we're in a safe space: a space where our secrets are safe, where we won't be mocked or judged.

I expect from all of you the utmost respect and discretion for your classmates, and I promise the same in return.

Likewise, everyone must feel free to pitch and share stories, topics, jokes, and ideas that may — in other places — be inappropriate, even offensive. While these ideas may ultimately never make it into a script, it's important and necessary that writers in a room feel free to go to extreme places in service of exploring potential stories, characters, jokes, and situations. The ability to do this is what allows us to create honest, innovative, challenging work. Therefore, you may hear ideas or thoughts that are upsetting or offensive. While I hope this doesn't happen, I hope that if it does happen, it is in service of exploring someone's work. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, please don't hesitate to come see me.

**Last But Not Least...**

Good writing does not come from talent. Good writing comes from hard work. This isn't to disparage talent—there are obviously talented writers out there—it's simply to say that any great piece of writing was created not because the person was talented, but because they poured their blood, sweat, and tears onto the page. In other words...

I will not give you A's just for showing up. I will not give you A's for putting down the first ideas that pop into your head. I will not give you A's for quick, sloppy, lazy work.

I will give you A's for writing harder, deeper, and more personally than you've ever written before... and then rewriting.

Also, industry professionals are partially defined, or rise and fall, by their interactions with other industry professionals. As such, you will be graded on your interactions in class. That means that class attendance is mandatory, as is class participation and attitude.

Lastly, “student” excuses for not doing what is expected of you will be your undoing. I know you're all busy; I know you have other classes, responsibilities, and lives. But please do not use them as excuses for failing to complete work or meet expectations here. As of right now, *you are a professional filmmaker*. Become one. This also means that all work must be completed on time.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### Week #1 — Introduction

**Monday Aug. 26:** Class introduction

**Wednesday Aug 28:** Upcoming Production Projects in the Program

### Week #2 — Getting Started

**Monday Sept 2:** Labor Day — campus closed / no class

**Wednesday Sept 4: Voice & Emotional Lens**

Go over syllabus

Voice & emotional lens

#### **Homework To Turn In Monday:**

- Write 2-3 paragraphs about how you see the world. If I were to step into your skin and look out of your eyes, what would I see? Is the world a battlefield, and every day is a fight to survive? Is it an amusement park, full of exciting rides and games? A garden that must be maintained and tended to... and you're the only one who knows how to do it? Write 2-3 paragraphs that allow me to see the world you see — and your place in it.

### Week #3 — Elements of Story

**Monday Sept 9:** What is Story? - Part I  
Wants & Obstacles

**Wednesday Sept 11: Elements of Story II & Finding Your Short Film's Premise**

What is Story? - Part II

Action & Transformation

Premise Lines

#### **Homework To Turn In Monday:**

- Write 3-5 premise lines for your short film. Write each premise as only 1-2 SENTENCES (preferably one). Each sentence, should capture:
  - The short film's genre (comedy, drama, horror, mystery, etc.)
  - The basic idea of the film
  - The film's central relationships and conflict
  - Where the movie lives emotionally and thematically
- Next, pick TWO of your ideas and write an EMOTIONAL LENS for each; allow us to step into your body and see the worlds through your eyes. *What do we see?* What's the genesis of

each idea... and why is it a story only you can tell? Why is it personal to you? What do you hope to say about the world with this story?

- FYI — As your film and script evolve, your emotional lens can change. **THIS IS OKAY.** But I always find it helpful to know what my lens is at any given moment, so I have a beacon to guide me. In other words, complete your assignment and turn it in this week... but know you may rework your lens next week, and the week after that, and the week after that. Not for a grade per se, but for your own self and process.
- Also FYI — If you're not sure which idea to concentrate on, write premise lines and lenses for more than two, and we can talk about them. Or, come see me, and we can discuss your ideas in person!

**IMPORTANT: THIS ASSIGNMENT SHOULD BE NO MORE THAN 2-3 PAGES TOPS.**

### **Week #4 — Character**

**Monday Sept 16:** Share/workshop assignments

**Wednesday Sept 18: Describing your characters - a two-pronged approach**

#### **Homework for next week:**

- **CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS** — Write 1-2 short paragraphs for each of your story's *main* characters. Things to think about:
  - How does this character see the world? If it's helpful, articulate it this way. "Bob sees the world as a traveling carnival, and he wants to ride every ride before the carnival goes away." "Carmella sees a world full of broken things and broken people... and believes it's her job to fix all of them."
  - How does this worldview manifest in specific behaviors or actions?
  - Based on these actions, how does the rest of the world perceive this character?
  - Pick one character and write a short paragraph (2-4 sentences) defining his or her relationships with one or two of the other main characters. What's their relationship dynamic? How/when do they love and support each other? When do they butt heads and conflict? How do they understand, or misunderstand, each other in unique ways?

**IMPORTANT: THIS ASSIGNMENT SHOULD BE 2-3 PAGES TOPS.**

### **Week #5 — Structure**

**Monday Sept 23:** Share/workshop assignments

**Wednesday Sept 24:** Structure  
Breakdown short film(s) in class

**Homework for next week:**

- **SHORT FILM BREAKDOWNS** — Watch your assigned short film and break it down into beats. Sift out the A-story, B-story, and C-story (if it has them), so you have different beat sheets for each individual storyline. We'll be sharing and comparing these with the entire class on Monday.

**Week #6 — Breaking Story / Beat Sheets**

**Monday Sept 30:** Share/workshop assignments - DISCUSS AS CLASS

**Wednesday Oct 2: Breaking Story / Beat Sheets**

How to “steal” structure

In-class exercise: breaking story

**Homework for next week:**

- **CREATE YOUR OWN BEAT SHEET** — Create your own beat sheet by laying the beats of your story atop the beats/functions of your model short film's beat sheet. Each beat must connect logically and emotionally to the next. When you're finished, your beat sheet should be an economical, yet totally logical, telling of your story. This is the homework you will turn in next week.

**Week #7 — Elements of a Scene**

**Monday Oct 7:** Share/workshop beat sheets

**Wednesday Oct 9: Elements of a Scene — outlines & PSA's**

PSA's: identifying elements of story

How do PSA's sell the organization?

**Homework for Monday, Oct. 14:**

- **BRAINSTORM 3-5 PSA IDEAS** — Thinking about everything we've learned so far — character wants, action, conflict, transformation, etc. — come up with 3-5 ideas for your PSA. Each idea can be for the same organization or totally different organizations. What's important is that it utilizes the storytelling elements we've been discussing and sells the organization in a positive light.

Each idea should be approximately 2-5 sentences long and tell, briefly, the story as it unfolds in the PSA. In other words, while it won't be fully scripted, we should be able to understand the full story when you pitch it.

We will workshop your ideas in class on **Monday, Oct. 14.**

### **Homework for Wednesday, Oct. 23:**

- EXPAND YOUR BEAT SHEET INTO AN OUTLINE — Flesh out each scene in your beat sheet, including all pertinent scene information, as well as any bits, jokes, or dialogue you hope make it into the script. Your goal is to have an outline so precise and comprehensive another writer could — using only that outline — deliver a first draft of the script you see in your head.

Writing a solid outline can take a lot of time, focus, and patience. Thus, this assignment will be **due on Wednesday, Oct. 23**, when we workshop our outlines in class.

**PLEASE MAKE SURE NO OUTLINE IS MORE THAN 3 PAGES LONG!!**

### **Week #8 — PSA's & Outlines**

**Monday Oct 14:** Share/workshop PSA ideas

- **Wednesday Oct 16: Look at various PSA scripts, format, dialogue, etc.**

### **Homework for Monday, Oct. 21:**

- WRITE THE FIRST DRAFT OF YOUR PSA — Based on the notes and feedback you receive on your pitch, select the PSA you'd like to focus on and write the first draft of the script. *It does not need to be perfect...* we will rewrite them over the course of the semester.

### **Week #9 - Workshop Week!**

**Monday Oct 21:** Share/workshop first drafts of PSA's

### **Homework for Monday, Oct. 28:**

- WRITE THE SECOND DRAFT OF YOUR PSA — Based on the notes and feedback you receive on your first draft, rewrite your PSA. The second draft will be due on **Wed., Oct. 30**.

- **Wednesday Oct 23: Share/workshop outlines**

### **Week #10 - Outline to Script**

**Monday Oct 28:** **Outline to script**  
Compare outlines to produced scenes  
Study script formats

**Homework for Monday, Nov. 4:**

- WRITE ONE 2-3 PAGE SCENE — Write one 2-3 page scene from your short film screenplay. (This doesn't need to be the script's first scene, but it certainly could be.)

This scene is **due next Monday, Nov. 4.**

**Wednesday Oct 30:** Workshop PSA 2nd drafts

**Week #11 - Rewriting**

**Monday Nov 4:** Workshop 2-3 page scenes

**Wednesday Nov 6:** How to rewrite

**Homework for Monday, Nov. 11:**

- COMPLETE THE FIRST DRAFT OF YOUR SHORT SCREENPLAY — Based on the notes you've received on your outline and the 2-3 page scene, complete the first draft of your screenplay. We'll be workshopping these in class next Monday, Nov. 4.

**Week #12 - Punching & Polishing**

**Monday Nov 11:** Share/workshop first draft

**Homework for Wed., Nov. 13:**

- BEGIN REWRITING YOUR SHORT SCREENPLAY — Utilizing the notes you receive during the workshop, rewrite your short film script.
- REWRITE A 3-4 PAGE SCENE & BRING IT TO CLASS ON 11/13 (WITH 5 HARD COPIES) — You don't need to rewrite the whole script by our next class, 11/13, however you *must* rewrite and bring to class one 3-4 page scene. Please bring 5 hard copies to class, as they will be distributed.

• **Wednesday Nov 13:** Punch Up Discussion

**Homework for Mon., Nov. 18 & Wed., Nov. 20:**

- PUNCH UP YOUR STAFF-MATES' SCENES — Peruse your staff-mates' 3-4 page scenes, focusing on how you could make not only the whole scene stronger, but how you could make each line sharper, funnier, stronger, more effective, more dramatic. Is the intent of the scene clear? Are there jokes or bits you could add? Could the scene be shortened or tightened?

(Also, feel free to come with multiple punches for the same line. The more "alts," the better.)

**Week #13 - Punch Sessions!**

**Monday Nov 18: Punch Up Session #1**

**Wednesday Nov 20: Punch Up Session #2**

**Homework for next week:**

- Continue rewriting, refining, polishing, and punching your short film scripts and PSA's!

**Week #14 - TBD**

**Monday Nov 25: Presentation of Class PSA Proposals to Faculty Panel**

**Wednesday Nov 27: Presentation of Class Short Film Proposals to Faculty Panel**

**Week #15 - Final Reading Festival**

**Monday Dec 2: PSA Reading Festival** — Today, we'll read all our PSA scripts in class... using your classmates as actors. We'll do our best to get through everyone's PSA. Today is not about critiquing or revising; it's simply about finally seeing, hearing, and celebrating the work we've done all semester!

**Wednesday Dec 4: Final Short Film Readings #1** — Today and next week, we'll read all our short film scripts in class. These final days are not about critiquing or revising; they're simply about seeing, hearing, and celebrating the writing we've done all semester!

**Week #16 - Final Reading Festival #2**

**Monday Dec 9: Final Short Film Readings #2**