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## MAR 252.01: Screenwriting

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## COURSE SYLLABUS - AUTUMN 2013 MEDIA ARTS 252: SCREENWRITING

Instructor: ANDREW SMITH &  
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TTh 9:30-11:30am  
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### Course Description:

We're here to tell exciting stories that are the template for films—the world's most lively art-form. The cardinal sin in screenwriting is to be boring. Bad screenwriting is easy; good screenwriting requires the mastering of a precise, learned craft.

The screenplay, being a distinct and complicated medium, needs consistency of form, unity of thought, and direction of action. I believe structure to be the heart of screenwriting. Dramatic structure is the starting point for conflict, character, action, voice, and theme. In this class, we will explore the crucial components of narrative-- what makes a good shot, scene, sequence, act, and ultimately, a good story.

This is primarily a workshop class. I see you as working writers, under whose butts I'm supposed to light a fire. Think of it as a semester-long conversation. I'll lecture when we start new units of study, but more often, I'll use your work as the springboard for discussion. "Nuts and bolts" examinations of format, adaptations, outlines, treatments, and the screenwriter's place in the film industry, will be part of the ground covered.

### Goals And Assignments

This course is about you and the screen stories you hope to tell. The more you put in to it, the more you'll get out of it. By December, you'll have **several shorter works** and a camera-ready, polished (e.g. re-written & re-written) **SHOOTING SCRIPT** (5-8 pages long). For most of you, this will be the script of the film you will shoot in the Spring.

Writing **exercises**— perhaps better words would be “opportunities” and “deadlines”— will be given throughout the semester. They're designed to grease the wheels of creative thought, and to challenge you to take your screenplay past the initial steps. You will also write **character descriptions, breakdowns and loglines/treatments** of your script(s).

How well you achieve these goals, and how well you shape and clarify your story, will define that mysterious unknown—your grade.

We will develop a basic understanding of visual story-telling, the structure of Scenes (and Sequences, Acts, Films), the three-dimensional character, the causal relationship of scene work, and the “ear” for naturalistic screen dialogue. The last third of the semester will concern the crucial, terrifying, process of REVISION. (Writing is rewriting).

### Books:

Howard, David & Mabley, Edward: The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writer's Guide to the Craft and Elements of a Screenplay. This book is (amazingly) out-of-print, but easily ordered off Amazon. Chapters of it will be available through Moodle

Munroe, Roberta Marie: How NOT To Make a Short Film: Secrets from a Sundance Programmer. Very practical and useful advice for beginning filmmakers/ screenwriters, suggesting what people who program short films are looking for (and are DEFINITELY NOT looking for) when they make decisions.

### **Scripts:**

One of the best ways to “see” how scenes, transitions, sequences, etc., are handled is to **read finished, professional scripts**. A list of available film scripts at the library (and from my collection) will be forthcoming. We will read several scripts in their entirety, and compare them to the finished film—to understand how film stories WORK—and how lines of dialogue always change from script to screen, but how structure rarely does.

### **Films:**

See as many as you can, wherever you can—features, shorts, experimental, even documentaries can help us understand STORY. We’ll spend class time analyzing film clips, to put concrete evidence behind abstract narrative ideas. You will also be required to watch illustrative films outside of class. In addition, relevant films from other classes, and current films “now playing” may be starting points for discussion.

### **Grading and Attendance:**

The Hard Work of the class will be the **effort** of original writing. There is no arbitrary standard for creative work, but it is not difficult to differentiate hack writing from genuine work. I go by the **BST** standard of grading: blood, sweat, and tears. There’s an obvious difference between a manuscript written off the top of your head the night before, and one labored over, proofread, read out loud, considered beat by beat. Padding pages by writing “banter” dialogue is, honestly, a terrible idea, easily detected. Don’t make yourself an easy target by turning in sloppy work. Treat each assignment as if it were to be read by a producer. As if a JOB depended upon it.

**Participation** is key: You have to “bring something to the party.” Attendance is mandatory, and tardiness is unacceptable, rude. You get one get out jail free card, and that’s it. Additional absences will adversely affect your grade. Keep in mind: **attendance is not equal to participation; it merely anticipates participation**. Your presence, dedication and contributions to the critiques are CRUCIAL to this class.

**Deadlines** are crucial in any writing enterprise, and hitting deadlines is imperative in the professional world. I will mark down any assignment 25% if it is submitted late, and you will get a ZERO on it if it is submitted more than one class meeting late. Come to class, read your fellow writer’s scenes, articulate critical ideas, ask smart questions, turn work in on time, and write until your characters occupy your dreams-- and you'll do fine.

### **Ground Rules:**

**Manuscripts:** You will post all copies of original work to Blackboard by the assigned dates. Unless otherwise instructed, you will also email your assignments to your instructor—in an editable form (e.g., NOT PDFs). You will be required to make comments (via Blackboard) to other student work, PRIOR to class, and in class, you will often be asked to lead the discussion/critique, so read your classmate's scenes thoroughly, print them and/or mark them up with questions, comments, reactions.

**Software:** All students in this class must use the latest version of **Final Draft** software. Since we are working in the short form, you can run the “Demo” version, which allows you to save scripts under 15 pages. But I STRONGLY RECOMMEND you purchase the software, as you will need it in any further writing classes, or if you're at all interested in writing a feature script—it is the industry standard. Check out [www.finaldraft.com](http://www.finaldraft.com) to download the Demo version or purchase your own copy.

**Formatting:** This is a no-brainer. If work is turned in improperly formatted, or with spelling and grammar errors, incorrect page order, or any other sloppy handicaps—it **will be marked down**. Such errors show a lack of respect for the class, the instructor, and yourself. All submissions MUST be 12 point Courier font. Give them a working title.

**Final:** There will be no final exam. But, KEEP IN MIND, your final, shooting script will be expected to be “camera-ready”—e.g., on the first day of classes next semester, it will be ready for production. This final script will be **due the last day of classes**.

**Plagiarism.** The University of Montana forbids plagiarism. If I discover you've been using work that is not your own, I'll flunk you. Crime does not pay. All work must be completely original. Even loose adaptations are off limits. Without the rights to something, you are wasting everyone's time, especially your own.

No derivative combinations of existing films, either. No “*Diehard* set in a school cafeteria” or “*Rushmore* set at Alcatraz.” The only adaptations allowed are from your own other personal works (short stories, plays—NOT dusted-off old scripts) – and I must approve such adaptations FIRST. You must clear any exceptions with me FIRST. Don't let me discover you've been rewriting an old screenwriting project.

**Privacy:** What we say about each other's work during class will stay between us. It will not wander into the outer reaches of this school, university or town. It will not be published in a blog.

**About services for students with disabilities:** The University of Montana provides upon appropriate academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. For more info, contact the Dean of Students.

## **Course Schedule: Screenwriting**

**August 31/ Sept. 2:** Introduction, syllabus, housekeeping.

Craft discussion-- Premise & Opening.

**Screening** (clips): The Wrestler, Slumdog Millionaire, Milk.

**Assignment #1: Prepare Story Pitch/ & Opening page**

**September 7/9:** Craft discussion—"Want." Protagonist/Antagonist & Their Objectives.

PITCH and CRITIQUE: Story & Openings.

**Assignment #2: The Dramatic Scene—for "Weekend Film Festival."**

DUE: Sept. 12 5pm (posted on Blackboard)

**September 14/16:** Workshop CRITIQUE: The Dramatic Scene

**48 HOUR FILM FESTIVAL PRODUCTION REWRITE DUE: Sept. 17<sup>th</sup>.**

**September 21/23:** Craft discussion— Conflict /Discovery & Reversal

**Assignment #3: DISCOVERY & REVERSAL/RELATED SCENES**

**September 28/30:** Workshop CRITIQUE: Related Scenes

**October 5/7:** Workshop CRITIQUE: Related Scenes

**October 12/14:** Craft discussion—Getting deeper: Objective & Subjective Drama/Dramatic

Irony. **Screening:** The Piano, The Others, George Washington

**October 19/21:** Craft discussion—Act Curtains & Endings. The Point of No Return.

**Assignment #4: FULL FIRST DRAFT.**

**October 26/28:** Craft discussion—Writing Dialogue & Narration

**Screening** (clips): Diner, Days of Heaven, Faces, Palm Beach Story

**November 2/4:** Workshop CRITIQUES: FULL FIRST DRAFT

**November 9/11:** Critiques, continued, if necessary.

Craft discussion— Rewriting: The real work. Writing for Production

**November 16/18:** Lecture: Structural Principals of Three-Act Films.

**Assignment#5: REWRITE—Shooting Script**

**November 23/25:** THANKSGIVING. NO CLASSES. Rewrite, Rewrite, Rewrite.

**November 30/Dec 2:** Workshop CRITIQUES: REWRITE

**December 7/9:** Craft Discussion--What to do with the damn thing.

(The world of the professional screenwriter).

**DECEMBER 10: Turn in FINAL SHOOTING SCRIPT to me, with "polish."**

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"TO BECOME AWARE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF THE SEARCH IS TO BE ONTO SOMETHING. NOT TO BE ONTO SOMETHING IS TO BE IN DESPAIR." WALKER PERCY

## Goals of this class:

### I. Lectures and Readings

1. Introduce students to the basic techniques of feature screenwriting.
  - a. roles of **characters** -- protagonist, antagonist. alternative characterization
  - b. character **motivation** -- objective. "What's the problem" "What's the fear?"
  - c. use (and misuse) of **exposition**.
  - d. "Who's scene is it?" The **dramatic** scene.
  - e. dramatic tension. **conflict**. discovery and reversal. hope vs. fear.
  - f. three-act **structure**. storyline. real problems, false problems.
  - g. dramatic **irony**. objective/subjective drama-- staying ahead of aud./character.
  - h. **timeframe** -- flashbacks, foreshadowing, framing, planting, payoff.
  - i. **unity** of story. thematic concerns. text/subtext. What happens vs. What it's about.
  - j. "**voice**" of the narrator-- who is telling the story? And can we trust them?
2. Investigate the workings of dramatic writing.
  - a. **dialogue**. pitfalls and shortcuts.
  - b. **internal/external** drama. empathy, sympathy w/characters.
  - c. scene/sequence **rhythm**. beats. heart of the scene. transitions.
  - d. plausibility. creating, and then staying within, **the world of the story**.
3. Explore the distinctions between screenwriting and other dramatic writing.
  - a. **format**. rules and reasons why. what is unnecessary, what is crucial.
  - b. **POV**. seeing through the camera eye.
  - c. **visuals**. non-dialogue sequences. metaphor. elements of montage.
  - d. **sound/image** -- using every aspect of film. painting picture in mind's eye.
4. Rules of the game.
  - a. the world of the screenwriter. **history and industry**. past, present, future.
  - b. **pitching**. where you go once you got a draft. where not to go.

### II. Workshop critiques.

1. Solving problems.
  - a. what works, what don't. litmus test -- peer & instructor comments.
  - b. working with **deadlines**. forcing you to write.
  - c. going back to the work. restructuring, **rewriting**.
2. Scene analysis.
  - a. articulating/defending **ideas** -- know why you wrote what you did.
  - b. constructive **criticism**. identifying flaws. get to the heart of the matter.
  - c. filmmaking as a **collaborative process**.

### III. Film/Video Screenings.

1. How to "**read**" a film. Paying attention to a writer's decisions.
2. Identifying **structural techniques** in practice.
3. Seeing the difference between **page** and **screen**. How to get from here to there.

### **Giving and Getting Criticism: A few notes on Workshop Etiquette—**

In the real world, every Agent, Producer, Studio Exec, Actor, and Mail Room Attendant you encounter will gladly tell you what's wrong with your script. It's like a big ol' piñata, and folks will whack it until its bled of all its candy. And then, in the IDEAL situation, someone will want to **make** it—and that's when the sharpest knives and daggers come out. So you got to be thick-skinned about your work to survive.

That being said, there is no need, nor tolerance, for cruelty. I'm not interested if you "like" or "dislike" your fellow writer's work—that is not useful, nor productive. Workshops are not about slaps on the wrist, nor, conversely, are they about slaps on the back. I want the critiques in the class to be more ANALYTICAL than CRITICAL. That means we talk about the material by contrasting "what it is" to "where it needs to be", and discuss ways to steer it in the proper direction. Negative comments are not nearly enough—we need to also identify possible solutions. If something isn't working for you, you need to be able to articulate why and what to do about it. It's not always what is ON the page—often it is what is MISSING.

Remember—the work is hard, so respect the work, even if it's not your particular cat's meow. The more respect you give other's work, the more respect for yours you'll get back. We're all here to help each other improve as writers. I'm optimistic. As Cocteau said: "Astonish me."