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MART 586.01: Screenwriting I

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Course Description:

Bad screenwriting is easy as pie; mediocre screenwriting is a waste of everyone's time; good screenwriting requires the mastering of a precise, learned craft. The cardinal sin in screenwriting is to be boring: we're here to tell exciting stories that are the templates for films— the world's most lively art-form.

Structure is 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 scene, a good act, and ultimately, a good script.

The film script, being a distinct, historically developed, coded and complicated medium, needs consistency of form, unity of thought, and direction of action.

This is primarily a workshop class. You are working writers, under whose butts I'm going to light a fire. Think of it as a semester-long conversation. I'll lecture; I'll diagram; I'll show clips; together we'll break down films & scripts (feature, short, animated, television). To a great extent, 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 will get out of it. By semester's end, you'll have written (and re-written, and re-written, and re-written) at least two "camera ready" short film scripts, each 5-10 pages long, that are uniquely yours but honor the formal and structural rules of the craft.

I'll also assign several writing exercises—better known as "deadlines"— designed to grease the wheels of creative thought, and to challenge you to take your screenplay past the initial steps— knowing where you're going next is half the battle.

We will develop a basic understanding of: visual story-telling; the structure of Acts; the three-dimensional character; the relationship of Acts to the Problem; the causal relationship of scene work; the use of voice-over and other "subjective" elements; the difference between single, double, and multiple protagonist structures; and the variety of ways and means of achieving naturalistic and/or expressionistic screen dialogue. We will also take a good look at the work and careers of several classic, prolific screenwriters.

The last third of the semester will concern the crucial, terrifying, process of REVISION. (Writing is rewriting).

Books: (Required)

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.

Books: (Recommended)

The Craft of the Screenwriter by John Brady
Terrific set of interviews with some of the great screenwriters of the 1960's & 1970's. Well worth having-- even though it's something of a relic. Very cheap on Amazon.

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:
You wouldn't try to write a novel until you read a few would you? It's surprising how many people think they can write scripts just because they like to watch movies. The best ways to "see" how scenes, transitions, sequences, etc., are handled is to **read finished, professional scripts**. A list of available texts at the library (and from my collection) is forthcoming. We will read one or two scripts in their entirety, and compare them to the finished film—to understand how film stories WORK.

Films:
See as many as you can, wherever you can. We'll spend class time analyzing film clips, to put concrete evidence behind abstract narrative ideas. You will also be required to watch particular films on outside of class.

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. If you come in late, you will be marked absent. You get one get out jail free card, and that's it. Attendance is not equal to participation; it merely *anticipates* participation. Your presence, dedication and contributions to the critiques are CRUCIAL to this class.

Grading Schemata:
Attendance & Participation: 50%. Assignments: 25%. Final Manuscript: 25%.

Deadlines are crucial in any writing enterprise. I will mark down any assignment 25% for every class meeting it is late. Come to class, turn work in on time, read your fellow writer's scenes, articulate critical ideas, write until your characters occupy your dreams, and you'll do fine.

Ground Rules:
You will provide all copies of original work. Unless otherwise instructed, you will make and bring to class a copy of each assignment for each member of the class, including me. You will often be asked to lead the discussion of another student's work, so read them thoroughly, and mark them up good. I may on occasion ask for all manuscripts to be turned in to me, to make sure you are pulling your 'critical' weight.

NOTE: If work is turned in with improper formatting, spelling and grammar errors, incorrect page order, or any other sloppy handicaps—**it will be marked down**. Such errors show lack of respect for the class, the instructor, and yourself. You've been warned. All submissions MUST be 12 point Courier font. Make sure they have a working title and your NAME on them.

There will be no final exam. But, KEEP IN MIND, your script will be work-shopped five or six times. In other words, you ought to be aiming for at least 7 pages of new material every week in order to reach the 30 pages required-- PRIOR to diving into full-fledged revisions/ cuts.

As you know, 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" will be tolerated. The only adaptations allowed are from your own other personal works (short stories, plays—NOT dusted-off old scripts) – and I must approve it 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.

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.

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."