

# **Syllabus**

## **Workshop: Intro to screenwriting**

**CINE 116 401**

**Fall 2015**

**Instructor: Bryan Delaney**

**Mondays 2-5pm**

**Location: Fisher Bennett Hall 323**

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

The course will cover the most important aspects of the art and craft of writing for the screen. Topics covered will include techniques for generating ideas, the drafting process, classical screenplay structure, conflict, characterization, dialogue, how to write visually, how to analyse your own work as a screenwriter, dealing with notes/feedback, scene structure, rewriting and other tools of the trade. We'll also discuss the business side of screenwriting, such as selling a script, working with agents, managers, producers, directors, casting agents, etc.

Each student will undertake to write the first half of a feature length screenplay (approx 60 pages) over the course. The focus of the course will be more on what might be called the 'classical' principles of screenwriting rather than the more avant-garde approaches to the art. The films we'll study and discuss will cover a range of genres – political thriller, western, romantic comedy, indie features and Hollywood classics.

Ideally students should come to the first class already prepared with an idea for a screenplay that they will write over the course, although this is not mandatory, as the first class will explore techniques for generating ideas. The classes will be a mixture of lecture, discussion, screenplay analysis, some writing exercises, discussion of viewed films and in-class workshopping and analysis of students' scripts.

### **GOALS**

1. To learn the fundamental principles of screenwriting and apply them to your own work in progress.
2. To complete the first half of a feature length screenplay (approx 60 pages) over the course.

3. To learn how to read and analyze your own work and the work of others *as a screenwriter*.
4. To gain an understanding of the business side of screenwriting.

## READING LIST

These books will be available at Penn Book Center, 130 S. 34<sup>th</sup> street, but students are welcome to purchase copies online.

### Required reading

*Screenplay: the foundations of screenwriting* by Syd Field

### Recommended Reading

*The Screenwriters Roadmap: 21 Ways to Jumpstart Your Story* by Neil Landau

*The 101 Habits of Highly Successful Screenwriters* by Karl Iglesias

*Adventures in the Screen Trade* by William Goldman

*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell

*Save the Cat* by Blake Snyder

## USEFUL WEBSITES

[www.wordplayer.com](http://www.wordplayer.com)

[www.mypdfscripts.com](http://www.mypdfscripts.com)

[www.imsdb.com](http://www.imsdb.com)

[www.avclub.com](http://www.avclub.com)

[www.filmcrithulk.wordpress.com](http://www.filmcrithulk.wordpress.com)

[www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

[www.script-o-rama.com](http://www.script-o-rama.com)

[www.JohnAugust.com](http://www.JohnAugust.com)

[www.filmmakermagazine.com](http://www.filmmakermagazine.com)

[www.deadline.com](http://www.deadline.com)

[www.filmsite.org](http://www.filmsite.org)

[www.thewrap.com](http://www.thewrap.com)

*Note:* most screenplay scripts can be found easily online at some of the above sites plus various others if you google the name of the script.

## SOME DEADLINES (because screenwriters love deadlines!)

1. For Class 2 (Monday, September 14) – all students must e-mail their idea (400 to 600 words approx.) for a feature length screenplay to me and the rest of the class by deadline of **6pm on Monday, September 7.**

2. All students must e-mail their revised or ‘stress-tested’ screenplay idea (homework from Class 2) to me by deadline of **6pm on Thursday, September 17**.
3. After Class 6, selected student(s) must e-mail their screenplay to all other students and me by the deadline of **6pm on Wednesday, October 14** to be workshopped in Class 7.
4. After Class 7, selected student(s) must e-mail their screenplay to all other students and me by the deadline of **6pm on Wednesday, October 21** to be workshopped in Class 8.
5. After Class 8, selected student(s) must e-mail their screenplay to all other students and me by the deadline of **6pm on Wednesday, October 28** to be workshopped in Class 9.
6. After Class 9, selected student(s) must e-mail their screenplay to all other students and me by the deadline of **6pm on Wednesday, November 4** to be workshopped in Class 10.
7. **December (date to be confirmed)** – final drafts of screenplays due from all students. To be e-mailed to me by deadline (to be confirmed).
8. **December (date to be confirmed)** – final grades due.

**Note re above deadlines:** The nature of the course (ie. the focus on student-written screenplays during class time) necessitates that some students deliver their drafts ahead of others in order for us to be able to ensure that each student’s screenplay is workshopped in class. The earliest of the drafts will need to be delivered by Wednesday, October 14 and the latest of the first drafts will be delivered by Wednesday, November 4.

There are benefits to delivering a draft early (more time to work on the rewrite after receiving feedback and therefore more time to improve the final draft) and there are benefits to delivering the draft later (more time to absorb what’s been covered in class and apply this knowledge to write a superior first draft, thereby leaving less to accomplish in the rewrite).

Neither the earlier nor the later deadline for submitting the work gives a student an unfair advantage, as it all evens itself out in the end. It’s a matter of personal preference which approach students would like to take and each student’s choice will depend on his/her working methods as a writer. Therefore, where possible, I’ll try to accommodate students’ preferences as to what dates they would like to deliver their drafts by. In the event of there being competition for the same slots we’ll decide by lottery which deadlines will be allocated to which students.

Deadlines are key to the professional screenwriter's working life. Because the course is built upon the requirement that students deliver their work in a timely manner, *students must adhere strictly to the deadlines once they've been agreed*. Failure to do so will have an adverse effect on your grade.

Preferably, all students will use Final Draft or CELTX software to write the screenplays. Drafts should be submitted as PDFs.

Receiving notes (comments on your work) from others and rewriting your scripts are a key part of being a professional screenwriter. To mirror this process, I will be giving detailed notes to each of you on your work throughout the semester designed to improve your draft. Each of you will be expected to do significant rewrites on your material as a result of these notes sessions.

**Note:** all work must be submitted with page numbers!

### **CONFERENCES**

I will be available to meet with students on campus by appointment. I will also be available by email on [bryandelaney1@gmail.com](mailto:bryandelaney1@gmail.com) or by phone on 646-460-6770.

### **OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION**

**Attendance:** Students must attend all classes. Absences must be excused in advance by me. If you are absent from any class without medical excuse (or other equally extenuating circumstances) this will have an adverse impact on your final grade.

**No late Work:** All deadlines must be strictly adhered to. Submitting late work will have an adverse effect on your grade. If you are ill or otherwise unable to submit your work by the required deadline, you need to let me know in advance as soon as possible.

#### **Academic integrity**

It is your responsibility to be familiar with the University's Code of Academic Integrity. Instances of academic dishonesty will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct for adjudication.

### **Schedule of classes**

N.B. – Please note that there will be no class on Labor Day (Monday, September 7. Class 2 will instead take place on Monday, September 14. Classes will continue every Monday thereafter as usual.

## **Class 1: Monday, August 31**

### **(Introduction to dramatic storytelling / generating ideas)**

Intro to the course and to each other.

Discussion of syllabus.

Students write brief analysis (structure, characterisation, themes) of their favourite film (to be written in class).

Intro to the fundamental principles of dramatic storytelling. (Stakes, need, action, conflict/resistance, transformation). Discussion.

Generating ideas for a screenplay – the role of the unconscious mind and the importance of ‘play’.

Executing the ideas – craft and the role of the conscious mind/critical faculty.

Specific techniques for generating ideas.

What makes a good premise – clarifying the central conflict.

Assignment: Students prepare an idea for a screenplay to be discussed in Class 2. Each idea should be between 400 and 600 words approx. and should briefly discuss proposed plot, characters and themes for the screenplay. In preparing your idea, please bear in mind the principles of dramatic storytelling covered in class 1. All students must e-mail their idea to me and the rest of the class by deadline of **6pm on Monday, September 7.**

Assignment: Watch *The Lives of Others* by Florian Henckel Von Donnersmarck

Assignment: Read the screenplay of *Winter's Bone* by Debra Granik and Anne Rosellini and watch *Winter's Bone*.

## **Class 2: Monday, September 14**

### **(Discussion of students' screenplay ideas in class)**

Students will have e-mailed their ideas for their screenplay to all other students and to me by the deadline of 6pm on Monday, September 7 in advance of Class 2.

In this class we will examine each of your ideas for dramatic potential.

Criteria for discussion:

- Is the setting specific and interesting?
- Character – does the story have a compelling protagonist?
- Need - does the protagonist have a strong need driving his/her action?
- Stakes – why is this need/goal so important? What happens if it is not satisfied?
- Action - does the idea lend itself to writing sustained dramatic action?
- Resistance/conflict/obstacles – is there potential for sustained dramatic conflict? (Protagonist vs forces of antagonism).
- Transformation – is there potential for rich character arcs and transformation through conflict?
- Potential to write visually? (ie. show don't tell)?
- Does the student feel a genuine connection to the material?

Recap of the above principles.

Discussion. Fundamental principles of dramatic storytelling (setting, stakes, need, action, conflict and transformation) in *The Lives of Others*.

Assignment: Students refine and flesh out their initial screenplay idea into a fully formed and 'stress-tested' screenplay idea based on the principles discussed in Classes 1 and 2. These revised ideas to be delivered to me by deadline of **6pm on Thursday, September 17**.

Assignment: Read *Hotel Rwanda* screenplay by Terry George and Keir Pearson and watch *Hotel Rwanda*.

### **Class 3: Monday, September 21**

#### **(Classical screenplay structure)**

The three act structure as per Syd Field – set-up, confrontation, resolution.

Inciting incident, plot point 1, midpoint, plot point 2, climax

Analysis of structure in *Winter's Bone*, *Hotel Rwanda*.

Three act structure as a tool to shape your story rather than a law to be slavishly followed.

The primacy of character in the three act structure. Structure as a tool to sink deep roots into character.

Assignment: Apply the three act structure to your film idea. Does it fit? What do you need to rework?

Assignment: Read *The Godfather, Part 2* (screenplay by Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola) and watch *The Godfather, Part 2*.

## **Class 4: Monday, September 28**

### **(The drafting process)**

Techniques for approaching the first draft.

The index card method to map out your screenplay.

Billy Wilder's 10 tips on storytelling. Discussion.

Assignment: Read *Silence of the Lambs* screenplay by Ted Tally and watch *Silence of the Lambs*.

## **Class 5: Monday, October 5**

### **(Characterization)**

The primacy of character in great storytelling for the screen

Techniques for creating effective screen characters. Discussion

Deep character vs surface character. Action and internal conflict.

Analysis of key characters in *The Lives of Others*, *Winter's Bone*, *Silence of the Lambs* and *The Godfather Part 2*.

Writing exercise: Character milestones exercise to tune into character's voice, needs and inscape (students use characters from their own screenplays)

Assignment – Read *Beasts of the Southern Wild* screenplay by Lucy Alibar and Benh Zeitlin and watch *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

Assignment: Write detailed character profiles of the main characters in your screenplay (deep character v surface character)

## **Class 6: Monday, October 12**

### **(Dialogue)**

The art and craft of screen dialogue (subtext, rhythm, tone, leanness, dialogue as action etc.) – Discussion with examples from films we've studied.

Dialogue writing exercise (dialogue as dramatic action)

Dialogue writing exercise (subtext)

Dialogue writing exercise (sound, rhythm, voice)

Assignment: Apply principles of dialogue learned in class to your screenplay.

Reading assignment: Read student screenplay(s) for next class. Selected student(s) must e-mail their screenplay to all other students and me by the deadline of **6pm on Wednesday, October 14** to be workshopped in next class).

Assignment: Read *Unforgiven* screenplay by David Webb Peoples and watch *Unforgiven*.

## **Class 7: Monday, October 19**

### **(Scene structure/Workshop of first student screenplay)**

Anatomy of a well-crafted scene. Discussion.

'Get in late, get out early', beats, resistance, change, turning points.

A scene as a microcosm/reflection of the overall structure of the film. A unit of action with its own beginning, middle and end.

Scene as a transaction where something is gained or lost.

Analysis of key scenes from viewed films.

Analysis and discussion of first student screenplay in class – structure, character, dialogue, theme etc.

Recap of core points and questions

Reading assignment: read student screenplay(s) for next class. Selected student(s) must e-mail their screenplay to all other students and me by the deadline of **6pm on Wednesday, October 21** to be workshopped in next class).

## **Class 8: Monday, October 26**

### **(Workshop of student screenplays, cont'd)**

Analysis and discussion of student screenplay(s) in class – structure, character, dialogue, theme etc.

Recap of core points and questions

Reading assignment: read student screenplay(s) for next class. Selected student(s) must e-mail their screenplay to all other students and me by the deadline of **6pm on Wednesday, October 28** to be workshopped in next class).

## **Class 9: Monday, November 2**

### **(Workshop of student screenplays, cont'd)**

Analysis and discussion of student screenplay(s) in class – structure, character, dialogue, theme etc.

Recap of core points and questions

Reading assignment: read student screenplay(s) for next class. Selected student(s) must e-mail their screenplay to all other students and me by the deadline of **6pm on Wednesday, November 4** to be workshopped in next class).

## **Class 10: Monday, November 9**

### **(Workshop of student screenplays, cont'd)**

Analysis and discussion of student screenplay(s) in class – structure, character, dialogue, theme etc.

Recap of core points and questions

Assignment: Read *The Hangover* (screenplay by Jon Lucas and Scott Moore) and watch *The Hangover*.

## **Class 11: Monday, November 16**

### **(Revision and rewriting)**

Discussion about *The Hangover*. Three act structure in a comedy, comic multiplication of obstacles, variety of characterisation etc.

Techniques for evaluating your draft.

Common problems of first drafts.

Dealing with feedback/notes.

The rewriting process – tips and techniques

Assignment: Read screenplay of *Annie Hall* by Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman and watch *Annie Hall*.

## **Class 12: Monday, November 23**

### **(Other tools of the trade – part 1)**

*Annie Hall*. Discussion. Variation on three act structure?

Other tools of the trade: a checklist to be applied to your screenplays before you submit the final draft:

- Point of attack – where to make the incision into the story/scene (Get in late; get out early)
- The importance of tension
- Writing vivid descriptions – creating the film in the reader's mind
- Dialectic – right vs right. The value of a strong, well-motivated antagonist.
- The world of the film – the importance of setting as an extra character
- Why now? – the value of a ticking clock
- The specific/concrete vs the general/abstract. The key to good storytelling.
- The audience as part of your writing process. Imagining audience reaction to every beat.
- Cultivating rigour – key to success as a screenwriter

Assignment: Continue to work on your screenplay.

## **Class 13 : Monday, November 30**

### **(Other tools of the trade – part 2)**

- Theme – the real meaning of the film. Letting theme emerge organically from story vs imposing it
- Exposition – how much is required and how to dramatise it
- Transitions – writing exercise to manage fluid transitions
- Point of view (POV)
- Techniques for keeping the audience leaning in – withholding key information and trickle feeding it as required
- The dangers of cliché – visual and verbal - how to avoid them
- Economy – how to write lean
- Telling the story in the cut
- Any other business

Assignment: Continue to work on your screenplay.

## **Class 14: Monday, December 7**

### **(The business of screenwriting)**

- Registering your script
- Breaking into the business. (Take care of the writing and Hollywood will find you!)
- Finding representation – agents v managers etc
- Selling a screenplay
- Dealing with agents, producers, directors etc.
- Dealing with notes, rewrites, being rewritten etc.
- Casting
- Practical consideration of production, rewriting on set etc.
- Open writing assignments/script doctoring etc.
- The writing life – how to think and live as a screenwriter
- Other forms – theatre vs film vs TV
- Any other business

Assignment: Continue to work on your screenplay.

**December (date to be confirmed)**

Deadline for delivery of final drafts. All students submit final drafts of their screenplays by e-mail to Bryan Delaney for assessment by the deadline (tbc).

**December (date to be confirmed)**

Bryan reads and assesses final drafts of student screenplays.

**December (date to be confirmed)**

Final assessment due from Bryan Delaney. Students receive their final assessment marks.

**IMPORTANT NOTE**

This syllabus is intended as a general guide to the course; it may be changed at any time at my discretion depending on the needs of the course and the students.