

Fall 2016
W 11-1:50 (CAC 315)

Dr. Cary Elza
Office: M 1-3, W 2-4, CAC 311
Cary.Elza@uwsp.edu

COMM 351: Writing for the Media: SCREENWRITING

Course Description

This course is designed to introduce you to the process of thinking about, writing, editing, and collaborating on screenplays for feature film. We'll cover the basics of structure, format, narrative and plot development, character development, and principles of conflict, and we'll think about audience, commercial considerations, and broader questions about where ideas come from and how we can develop them into tangible products. As we go, we'll be watching movies and reading screenplays in order to get a feel for structure, tone, character, genre, setting, and dialogue.

Course Goals

By the end of this course, students should:

- Identify and employ basic elements of successful media writing, including theme, narrative, voice, format, and audience.
- Compose articulate, grammatically correct work in a variety of genres or modes.
- Demonstrate critical reading and writing skills.

But in addition to these basic learning outcomes, we've got a few other goals:

- Think and create imaginatively within limits—work with RULES
- Willingly and thoughtfully edit, criticize, and rewrite both your own work and others'
- Collaborate to create and compose, to appraise and judge, and to make each work the best work it can be
- Produce creative work on a self-imposed (in addition to externally-imposed) schedule—in other words, think and create on your own time, making time for reflection

Requirements (total of 100 points)

Participation/attendance	15%
In-class exercises (including revisions and critiques)	20%
Homework assignments	20%
Original Beat Sheet	10%
Step-Outline/Treatment	10%
Final Screenplay	25%

Grading Scale

A: 94-100	B-: 80-83	D+: 67-69
A-: 90-93	C+: 77-79	D: 64-66
B+: 87-89	C: 74-76	F: 0-63
B: 84-86	C-: 70-73	

Readings

There is one textbook for this course: Robert McKee's *Story*. It is available for rent and purchase through the bookstore. All other readings will be on D2L as PDF files or links. Readings should be completed by the day under which they're listed.

You are welcome to purchase Final Draft for this class, but it's expensive. Instead, consider using a free screenwriting program like Celtx (<http://celtx.com/index.html>). I don't care HOW you get your screenplay in the correct format—technically, you can do all of this successfully in Word—but it's up to you if you want to use software to make your life easier.

Attendance Policy

This class is collaborative, and only meets once a week. Attendance is mandatory, and will be taken at the beginning of class. **If you are late, it is your responsibility to come up and make sure I've marked you down as present.** If you need to miss class for an emergency, let me know *in advance*. Absences will be excused on a case-by-case basis. You are allowed one unexcused absence, then after that each unexcused absence reduces your participation grade by a point.

Furthermore, it's incredibly important that you show up prepared for class—do the readings, complete your assignments, and think actively about your screenplay even when you're not in class! If you're not prepared, you're hurting yourself AND your collaborators, and you're betraying your script and making it sad.

Assignments

Exercises: These will be evaluated on the degree to which you fulfilled the assignment, the quality of the writing (clarity, correctness, engaging voice), and the freshness and complexity of the ideas. This goes for in-class assignments (which will typically be graded on a check system) and homework assignments (which will typically be graded on a 5-point system).

Beat Sheet and Step-Outline/Treatment: We will discuss the format of these assignments in more detail as we go along. But like your shorter exercises, they will be graded on the degree to which you adhered to the assignment, the quality of the writing, and the quality of the ideas. Each student will complete his or her own Beat Sheet, but once we get past this stage in the screenwriting process, you will have the option to work in pairs or teams.

Final feature-length screenplay: Your screenplay, whether you complete it by yourself or with a partner, will be evaluated on these criteria:

1. length (more on this as we proceed, but your goal is a feature-length film)
2. adherence to the standard screenplay format
3. quality or cleverness of the story, the story's ability to grab a reader's attention
4. formal logic of the narrative (regardless of whether your structure is classical or independent or a form all your own)
5. depth and originality
6. compelling theme
7. quality of the writing: clarity, correctness, voice

Requirements for Written Assignments

Papers must be typed, in 12-point font, page-numbered, and stapled, and adhere to the proper format, when applicable. I reserve the right to deduct points for violations of these requirements. Late papers drop by 10% for each 24 hours it's late, whether it's the weekend or a weekday (i.e., a 100-point paper one day late will be penalized 10 points before I grade it). Extensions may be

granted on a case-by-case basis for personal emergencies, but ONLY if you ask me IN ADVANCE of the actual due date.

Class Environment

Students are expected to contribute to a respectful, productive learning environment. This includes being on time, being attentive, participating in class discussions, and being nice to everyone, regardless of their views. Technology is a big issue, but rest assured that it's pretty easy to tell whether a student is actually taking notes on a laptop or checking email/whatever. If you're going to use a laptop or tablet, please use it for class purposes, and please switch cell phones to silent. Also, no texting in class, please. Any violation of the above will impact your attendance/participation grade.

Guidelines for Assessing Participation Grades

- Tardiness; degree and frequency
- Not just frequency, but quality of comments. Is it evident that the student has done the readings and engaged with the material?
- Consideration and respect for other students and their points of view
- Engagement with the class (i.e., sleeping or excessive talking to others while the professor or another student is speaking)
- Technology use: disrespectful or reasonable?

Disability Statement

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal law requiring educational institutions to provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. For more information about UWSP's policies, check here:

<http://www.uwsp.edu/stuaffairs/Documents/RightsRespons/ADA/rightsADAPolicyInfo.pdf>

If you have a disability and require classroom and/or exam accommodations, please register with the Disability and Assistive Technology Center and then contact me at the beginning of the course. I am happy to help in any way that I can. For more information, please visit the Disability and Assistive Technology Center, located on the 6th floor of the Learning Resource Center (the Library). You can also find more information here: <http://www4.uwsp.edu/special/disability/>

Statement of Academic Integrity

UW-Stevens Point values a safe, honest, respectful, and inviting learning environment. In order to ensure that each student has the opportunity to succeed, we have developed a set of expectations for all students and instructors. This set of expectations is known as the Rights and Responsibilities document, and it is intended to help establish a positive living and learning environment at UWSP.

Click here for more information:

<http://www.uwsp.edu/stuaffairs/Pages/rightsandresponsibilities.aspx>

Academic integrity is central to the mission of higher education in general and UWSP in particular. Academic dishonesty (cheating, plagiarism, etc.) is taken very seriously. Don't do it! The minimum penalty for a violation of academic integrity is a failure (zero) for the assignment. For more information, see the UWSP "Student Academic Standards and Disciplinary Procedures" section of the Rights and Responsibilities document, Chapter 14, which can be accessed here:

<http://www.uwsp.edu/stuaffairs/Documents/RightsRespons/SRR-2010/rightsChap14.pdf>

Terms of Enrollment

This syllabus is a contract. By taking this class, you agree to the policies listed here. I reserve the right to change the syllabus, with timely notification to students.

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CLASS SCHEDULE
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Week One: INTRODUCTION

Wednesday, 9/7

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Week Two: THE BASICS

Wednesday, 9/14

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 1-2
 --handout on format
 --*Romancing the Stone* script (Diane Thomas)
Screening: *Romancing the Stone* (1984, Robert Zemeckis, 106 min)

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Week Three: SETTING AND GENRE

Wednesday, 9/21 **LOGLINE ASSIGNMENT DUE**

Readings: *Story*, Ch. 3-4
 --*Jaws* script (Peter Benchley)
Screening: CLIPS of *Jaws* (1975, Steven Spielberg)

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Week Four: CHARACTER AND CONTROLLING IDEA

Wednesday, 9/28 **STORY WORLD ASSIGNMENT DUE**

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 5-6
 --*Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* script (Jeffrey Price and Peter Seaman)
Screening: *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988, Robert Zemeckis, 104 min)

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Week Five: OVERVIEW OF STRUCTURE

Wednesday, 10/5 **CHARACTER ASSIGNMENT DUE**

Readings: --*Story*, Ch 19

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Week Six: STRUCTURE II (PROTAGONIST, “THE GAP,” INCITING INCIDENT)

Wednesday, 10/12 **CONTROLLING IDEA ASSIGNMENT DUE**

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 7-8

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Week Seven: STRUCTURE III (ACT DESIGN, PLOT ELEMENTS, BUILDING THE BEAST)

Wednesday, 10/19 **BEAT SHEET OF YOUR FILM DUE**; in-class decisions on collaboration will be made. Groups/pairs meet; start working on revisions to Beat Sheet and begin working on step-outline.

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 9

--Snyder, "Building the Perfect Beast"

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Week Eight: STRUCTURE IV (SCENE DESIGN AND FORMAT)

Wednesday, 10/26 **REVISED BEAT SHEET DUE**; Discuss FORMAT

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 10

--*Casablanca* screenplay (Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein and Howard Koch)

Screening: *Casablanca* (1942, Michael Curtiz, 102 min)

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Week Nine: STRUCTURE V (SCENE ANALYSIS AND COMPOSITION)

Wednesday, 11/2 Discuss scene building in *Casablanca*; groups/pairs meet to work on building step-outline

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 11 (p 252-271), Ch. 12

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Week Ten: STRUCTURE V (CRISIS, CLIMAX AND RESOLUTION)

Wednesday, 11/9 Groups/pairs meet; **STEP-OUTLINE DUE AT END OF CLASS**

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 13-14

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Week Eleven: EXPOSITION; CHARACTER; DIALOGUE

Wednesday, 11/16 Groups/pairs meet for peer review of step-outlines; **READER REPORTS DUE AT END OF CLASS**

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 15 and 17

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Week Twelve: THANKSGIVING

Wednesday, 11/23 **NO CLASS; THANKSGIVING BREAK**

Readings: WORK ON SCRIPT and PITCH YOUR FILM to your relatives whether they like it or not. Especially if they resist. Make them commit to investing in your film.

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Week Thirteen: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS; THE PITCH

Wednesday, 11/30: **OPENING SCENE(S) (UP UNTIL INCITING INCIDENT) DUE;** in-class activity on pitches

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 16

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Week Fourteen: TABLE READS; PEER REVIEW

Wednesday, 12/7 **EVERYBODY PREPARES SCENE FOR POTENTIAL READING; READER REPORTS DUE AT END OF CLASS**

Readings: WORK ON SCRIPT

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Week Fifteen: THE BUSINESS OF SCREENWRITING; MORE TABLE READS

Wednesday, 12/14 **EVERYBODY PREPARES SCENE FOR READING**

Readings: WORK ON SCRIPT

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Week Sixteen: FINAL TABLE READS AND WRAP-UP

Monday, 12/19, 10:15-12:15: **TURN IN SCRIPTS; TABLE READ OF WINNING SCRIPT(S)**