

COMM 202, Story for TV and Film

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Overview and Course Objectives

Comm 202, Story for TV and Film teaches beginning students how to think through story like professional writers, develop respect for the craft, write with confidence, authenticity and enjoy the process of writing. Our focus is building a writing practice, mastering the fundamentals and aligning the stories we tell with our own unique vision. Of note, the word “story” implies classic dramatic structure, traditional storytelling with a beginning, middle and end, a rising tension line and resonant climax. This is a training ground for mastering a specific style of writing. The goal is for each student to complete a half-hour single camera screenplay in any genre, which is roughly 30 singled-spaced pages in proper format.

The course takes place at Loyola’s downtown Water Tower Campus on Thursdays from 4:15 to 6:45 and goes from January 19 - May 4, 2023.

Course Materials and Media

The text book we use is the instructor’s recently (2020) published book, 27 Essential Principles of Story, Master the Secrets of Great Storytelling from Shakespeare to South Park. We will study expertly crafted films, television shows and new media. Each story is carefully selected to highlight a principle and we will review screenplays and teleplays to explore their transition to the screen. We will also read articles and excerpts from noted story scholars, watch interviews with noted screenwriters and explore content from related fields such as influence, psychology, neuroscience and philosophy that relate to craft of story.

Grading

The instructor believes grading is an effective way to inspire excellence and evaluate progress. That said the purpose is to transmit knowledge from instructor to student and all grading will be done with humility, realizing that a student can earn an “A” and quickly forget lessons or an “F” and use lessons learned to go on to become a brilliant writer. Note that students’ work will be judge on the effort displayed, by demonstrating an ability to actually execute the principles learned, not by a subjective analysis of talent.

Grades will be determined by the following formula:

- 40% - In-Class Engagement
- 30% - Script Quality
- 30% - Final Exam

In-Class Engagement

Since television and film are collaborative arts, class participation including attendance, positive energy and focus are essential. Therefore 40% of the grade will be based on class participation. This means engaging in conversations, fully committing to drills and consistently demonstrating that assignments were completed. Of course some students are more introspective and reserved than others. So “engagement” will be based more on quality than quantity.

Of note, we are still living through a pandemic and students must protect each other by staying home when sick or feeling even remotely symptomatic. Any student who attends class while being symptomatic endangers their fellow students and such a transgression will negatively impact their grade. The instructor will be very understanding about absences due to illness and work to assure the key points of each lesson missed are made up.

Script Dedication

By “Script Dedication” we mean the effort put in to making sure your script is written with authenticity, that the principles explored in class are evident in the work and that the final submission is properly formatted, free from egregious errors and dignifies **your** story. You will have 10 weeks to write the first draft of a thirty-page story and four to rewrite it based on our discussions.

Final Exam

At the end of the class there will be a comprehensive multiple choice exam given that will encompass the key points studied. This will be a *simple* but extensive 50-question exam. And we will review the material in depth the week before the final.

Key dates: Script Submission and Final Exam

- The first draft of your script is due March 23rd.
- The final draft of your script is due April 27th.
- The final exam is on the last day of class, May 4th.

Coursework

1) The Basics of Screenwriting (Jan 19)

We'll go over course objectives, introduce each other, establish the ideal mindset for a building a safe, constructive, inspired classroom. We'll discuss – and adjust - the list of stories to explore throughout the semester, cover the basics of formatting screenplays and do a simple, general introduction to Classic Dramatic Structure. We'll work on building a writing practice and read an essay, "The Power of Story" by E.O. Wilson. The purpose of this class to get inspired to write and master the craft of story.

2) Self Elicitation and Story Selection (Jan 26)

An essential and surprisingly underrated element of storytelling is simply aligning the story you wish to tell with the truth of who you are and what you really feel. In this class we'll complete a detailed Self-Elicitation Guide to help you get aligned, and cover the basics of story construction to help you generate ideas for your script.

3) The Conventions of Genre and Crafting a Treatment (Feb 2)

Pre-Class Reading Assignment: : 27 Essential Principles of Story, Chapter 21 Exceed expectations. Optional Bonus Assignment: watch 30 Rock episode "Jack-tor."

Genre is an often misunderstood but critically important word. Here we'll explore various genres, break down their unique attributes and discuss the difference between convention and cliché. Then we'll develop a treatment, which is a living document that organizes all of the key aspects of your story. By "living" we mean it will evolve as you work through drafts of your script and are struck by ideas at random times.

4) Building Your World (Feb 9)

Pre-Class Reading Assignment: 27 Essential Principles of Story, Chapter 20 Link Inextricably to Your Setting. Optional Bonus Assignment: Consider the world of your favorite story and, using the chapter above, note the degree of specificity of the story's world and how it impacts the characters who inhabit the story. In-class viewing/reading: TBD.

In class, we'll explore how a master screenwriter created their world, analyze what makes the setting of your story compelling and build a world for your script.

5) Character Design, Part I (Feb 16)

Pre-Class Reading and Listening Assignment: 27 Essential Principles of Story, Chapter 15, Write Characters to the Top of Their Intelligence and listen to the song “Stan” by Eminem.

In class, we’ll explore five essential principles of character, including Make your hero active and decisive, Provoke dilemma, Layer conflict, Peel the onion and Write Characters to the top of their intelligence. For each we’ll do a writing drill to instill the principle. This will give you a very strong foundation for compelling, dimensional, interesting characters. In-class viewing/reading: TBD.

6) Character Design, Part II (Feb 23)

Pre-Class Reading Assignment: 27 Essential Principles of Story, Chapter 16, Mask everyone. Optional Viewing Assignment: Watch Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (Optional).

In class, we’ll explore three essential principles of character, including Mask everyone, Earn transformations and Motivate fierce antagonists. For each we’ll do a writing drill to instill the principle. This will add to your foundation for writing characters who have the depth and gravitas necessary to carry a story. In-class viewing/reading: TBD.

7) Plot Construction, Part I (Mar 2)

Pre-Class Reading Assignment: 27 Essential Principles of Story, Chapter two, Ask dramatic questions. Optional Viewing Assignment: Finding Nemo.

In class, we’ll explore three essential principles of plot, including Drop the hammer, Ask dramatic Questions and Explore all endings. For each we’ll do a writing drill to instill the principle. These three principles are designed to help you start your story off strong and build a track for it to ride on so you that you don’t lose focus. This will give you a shot of confidence that your story has purpose and direction but still leave you with enough flexibility to express yourself in your own unique way. In-class viewing/reading: Finding Nemo.

8) Plot Construction, Part II (Mar 9)

Pre-Class Reading Assignment: 27 Essential Principles of Story, Chapter four, Connect with “Therefore” not “And.” Optional Viewing Assignment: South Park, Breast Cancer Show Ever.

In class, we’ll study three more essential principles of plot, including Connect with “therefore” not “and”, Escalate risk and Clash expectation with reality. For each we’ll do a writing drill to

instill the principle. These three principles are designed to help you build momentum through the middle of your story and increase your reader's interest in the story. In-class viewing/reading: TBD.

9) Plot Construction, Part III (Mar 16)

Pre-Class Reading Assignment: 27 Essential Principles of Story, Chapter eight, Begin the end with a critical decision. Optional Viewing Assignment: The Godfather, Part II

In class, we'll study three more essential principles of plot, including Begin the end with a critical decision, Confirm the decision and Wrap up fast. For each we'll do a writing drill to instill the principle. These three principles are designed to help you finish your story with an exciting and powerful climactic action that best expresses the Truth of how you feel. In-class viewing/reading: TBD.

10) Developing Theme/First Draft Due (Mar 23)

Pre-Class Reading Assignment: 27 Essential Principles of Story, Chapter Twenty four, Hunt big game. Viewing Assignment (NOT optional): YouTube, RARE Toni Morrison interview on "Beloved" (1987) – linked here - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2jxN3oTSD34>

In class we'll discuss the first draft, how the work is going, challenges, wins and setbacks experienced and anything else students wish to discuss about writing. We'll re-visit our self-elicitation guides and do exercises to further explore defining experiences, and develop strategies to strengthen your thought process and knowledge base. We'll also read excerpts from the book Range by David Epstein, discuss the Toni Morrison interview in detail and time allowing discuss the author Junot Diaz and his relationship to his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. This will help students learn to think more intelligently about the ideas that fuel their most inspired work.

11) Writing Dialogue (Mar 30)

Pre-Class Reading Assignment: 27 Essential Principles of Story, Chapters Twenty Two, Craft actionable dialogue and Twenty Three, Hide meaning.

In class, we'll study two essential principles of writing dialogue, including Craft actionable dialogue and Hide meaning. We'll do drills to learn to write dialogue that is not just realistic but richly detailed, filled with layered meaning, teeming with psychological depth, that propels our narratives forward. And we'll explore the difference between writing dialogue in prose, for the page, vs writing dialogue for the screen. In-class viewing/reading: TBD.

12) The Principles of Story Review (Apr 6)

By this point we have covered a significant amount of material. Together we'll watch a movie or television show and stop after each scene to discuss how the screenwriter executed an essential principle of story. The purpose here is to see how ALL the principles coalesce in a single story and reflect off each other to cause the creative equivalent of a chain reaction and craft a memorable and impactful story. In-class viewing/reading: TBD.

13) The Writers' Room (Apr 13)

Together we will create the writing room of a fictional TV show. Students will be given the roles of various personalities that are known to inhabit Hollywood's most legendary writing rooms. This will be both entertaining and at times emotionally engaging as we create the realistic vibe of working in a collaborative writers' room for television. The goal here is to help you learn what it actually feels like to be an elite-level professional creative writer. But be warned – while it can be an amazing, inspired experience it can also be tough sledding.

14) The Business of Story and The Reality of the Writing Life (Apr 20)

Here we will go fearlessly into the places too many writing programs fail to discuss at all. We'll talk about odds of success, how money works, the challenges of integrating your family life with your professional creative life and present options for the general style of Writing Life that might best suit you. The key here is to address those things are difficult to teach, that are hard to consider but that, nevertheless, massively impact careers in Story. This may include reading essays in class and watching interviews with notable writers.

15) Final Exam Prep/Final Script Submission (Apr 27)

Here you will submit the final draft of your screenplay and we will celebrate your achievement. Whether you think your script is pure genius or the worst one ever written, the fact is you finished it. You did the work. And as fight coach Jon Kavanagh says, "We win or we learn." We will then we will review, yet again, the essential principles of Story to help you prepare for your final exam. Together we will grade your work in-class. This will also give you a chance to ask questions and clarify any concepts you don't understand.

Final Exam & Farewell (May 4)

In this class you will take a 50-question multiple choice exam in the first 1.5 hours. The test will cover the principles of story including Plot, Character, Setting, Dialogue and Theme. And briefly

touch on items that impact your writing practice and mindset. We will grade them together, in-class, to give you a chance to correct up to three mistakes by demonstrating clear understanding of the principle post-mistake. A farewell blessing will be given to all celebrating the advances you've made as authentic storytellers who respect this primal human craft.