

# Writing without words

## Learn the basics of visual storytelling in an intensive screenwriting bootcamp

**Film 3900, Section 3**  
**Mondays 07:30 PM - 10:05 PM**  
**Columbine Hall 317**

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Movies (including television shows) are as unique in the world of art as they are universal in global culture. They draw on dramatic structures as old as civilization, the musical force of 19th century opera, and the magic of technology invented, literally, an hour ago.

It takes 100's of artists and artisans, \$10's and \$100's of millions, and years of labor to create an hour or two of entertainment that is so seamless, so captivating that we lose our sense of time—even our sense of self.

None of it can happen until a writer puts ink to page.

It's a unique challenge, like no other form of creative writing. Unlike a novel, you're structuring an experience that unfolds in time, in one sitting. Like a play, you tell your story with setting, action, dialogue and... that's it. But you can go anywhere, leap in time, and invent worlds that only exist in your imagination.

This class will introduce you to the fundamentals of writing for the screen, teach you how to unlock the mechanics of practically any story, and help you lay a foundation for a life-long writing practice.

## What we will learn

### Story

- What a story is and isn't
- The basic ingredients of every interesting story
- How to generate ideas and push them as far as you can

### Action, character & worlds

- How to tell a story without using words
- How to build a character and a world
- What to do with dialogue
- How to bury the message (or kill it altogether)

### Beats, scenes, plot and structure

- The structure of narratives that unfold in time
- How to write a scene
- How to assemble scenes into a plot

- How to create, revise and FINISH complete, camera-ready scripts

### How to write

- Creativity, anxiety and the power of habit
- Developing your writing practice
- It's a marathon, not a sprint: in 10,000 hours you'll start to be a master
- How to be a supportive and critical reader (for others and yourself)

## Our method

We will develop a practical, simple set of tools that you can use to understand how virtually any narrative art form works. We'll apply these tools in increasingly sophisticated ways to increasingly complex filmed stories, again and again, until the tools and the knowledge they unlock become muscle memory.

You will put what you learn to work immediately — inside and outside class — by writing scenes, sequences, dialogue, and a series of complete, short scripts.

Everything we do throughout the course will focus on learning **tools you need to create**. We will spend no time reading dramatic theory, how-to books or other people's opinions. This class is all about you learning how to be your own teacher.

## Helping each other

Ideas are fragile. The only things more fragile than new ideas, are people brave enough to share their mixed-up, half-formed, not-quite-sure-if-it-will-work dreams. Therefore, the primary requirement of this class is to be **KIND, CARING** and **SUPPORTIVE** of ideas in all shapes and sizes.

The world, sadly, is not nice. Especially to new ideas. "No" is the default answer, which means you have to express your ideas so well that people simply can't say "no." To create work that good, you have to be **HONEST** and **CRITICAL** about your work and your classmates' work.

How can you be kind & honest, nice & critical at the same time? **By focusing on execution.** What is the writer trying to accomplish? Do they succeed? What works? What doesn't?

By the end of this course, you'll have a solid set of tools for criticizing and helping each other. Plus (if class goes as planned) a rock-solid community of writers that has each other's backs.

## Materials and tools

- Access to Amazon Prime, Apple TV, Netflix and/or DVD/BlueRay discs and a player
- A small budget for renting / buying titles that don't come with your existing streaming service
- Dedicated class notebook or journal(s) and pens / pencils
- A calendar where you can track your writing time (digital is fine)
- 3-4 packs of index cards
- A smartphone with a basic video editing app (iMovie / Android equivalent)
- A laptop / chromebook / tablet with a keyboard and a word processor (google docs, word, pages, open office).

## Weekly Assignments

Our class meets Monday nights, 7:30–10:00, which means we have a week between meetings. Most weeks we'll have 2-3 assignments and one peer review.

Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
	Class 7:30-10:05 PM						
Assignments	Viewing and breaking down shorts, 1/2 hour, and 1 hour films and television shows Reading and breaking down original scripts Writing assignments Peer reviews						
Due dates	Previous week's work due in class and Canvas			Peer reviews due in Canvas			

## Workload: What you will create

This is not an easy class. Practice is the best way to master any trade or craft—writing is absolutely no different.

### There will be continuous workouts...

- Pitches, outlines, character sketches, scenes and scripts
- Verbal and written critiques of your peer's work
- Written critiques of your own work
- Written breakdowns of produced scripts, short films, and episodic television

### And formal, tent pole scripts

- 2 Page/1 minute silent script
- 3 Scene/6-9 page silent script
- 5 Scene/10-15 page silent script
- 3 Scene/6-9 page script with dialogue
- A final 10 scene/20-30 page script with or without dialogue

## Grades

As noted above, ideas are fragile, subjective and squishy. Execution is what your peers, the world and I will judge you on. Here is my rubric for grading your work:

- **Mechanics.** Clear application of concepts and techniques as we learn them
- **Spectacular failure.** Nothing demonstrates you're pushing it like a failure. *Note—sloth, avoidance and not trying is not failure by this definition*
- **Rethinking, reworking, reimagining.** Evidence that you've worked through problems proves your grit and learning
- **Peer reviews.** You'll formally review each others work. The effort you put into helping each other through peer reviews is a part of your grade for each assignment
- **Extra credit.** You may rewrite every script you hand in on-time if you meet with me and discuss your reasons for revising and strategy for making it happen.

**Late assignments and scripts are NOT accepted.**

If you blow a deadline, take the loss and move on to the next project. If you foresee a problem, get a draft in early, because... You may re-do any assignment that you think you can improve if: you hand in the completed assignment on-time (or early) with a clear, written explanation of why you want to re-submit.

***Note: Your your final script is 40% of your grade. Weighting the end of the course frees you to push, experiment, fail and fail again throughout the course. I have even built-in time for you to redo your final script or create an entirely new project after the first draft. Freedom to fail (spectacularly) is a great thing. Use it!***

## High-Level Course Outline

This class follows a basic structure. We may vary our activities, the films we watch, and the scripts we read based on the how we progress.

### Act One: Writing without words

#### **Week One: What is a Story?**

The key questions: defining story elements, sending a message without Western Union

#### **Week Two: Desire**

The impossible simplicity of desire & the creative challenge writing without words

#### **Week Three: Heroes and their journeys**

Heroes: characters who know no arc, true friends, broken worlds and restoration

#### **Week Four: Trapped: Situations and the stories they drive**

Conflicted worlds, the power of what's not there, screenwriting style

### Act Two: People can talk?

#### **Week Five: When people drive stories**

Realism and human motive, the power of speech, small scenes / big emotions

**Week Six: Fighting words: fueling conflict with lethal language**

Dialogue-only drama, scene craft, and tragedy

**Week Eight: Short Stories and anthology television**

Less time, more impact: packing a world in into 20 minutes

**Week Nine: Never-ending tales: Serials and Episodic drama**

Situation and characters, a movie in an hour... or five years

**Week Seven: Surprise! The power of plot.**

Story v/s plot, setting up / paying off, credible twists

## **Act Three: Writer's Workshop**

**Week Eleven: The big script**

The daily the practice of writing. Pitches for final project. Workshops in class.

**Week Twelve: Characters, outlining and scene cards**

Notes, doubt, anxiety. Character, outlines, scene cards

**Week Thirteen: Beginnings and ends**

Draft your first and last scenes. Double check character and structure—will this work?

**Week Fourteen: The middle**

Draft your middle 4-7 scenes. Do you have a mid point / Mount Suber? Do you have the end of the second act locked?

**Week Fifteen: First draft**

Push through the complete script. Revise, redo as needed.

**Week Sixteen: Table reads**

Revise, redo, improve. All final projects due Thursday 5/7. Filmed table reads in class.

**Week Seventeen: Finals**

FINALS WEEK NO CLASS

**Final draft due on Midnight, last day of finals week**

## Addendum: Thoughts about the class

### **This class is an experiment**

It's an experiment for you and for me. The same rules about spectacular failure apply to the class itself. We hereby grant ourselves permission to misfire and rethink at any time. The class has a good general structure, but it may need to change. If it does, we will.

### **Speak up!**

If you want to write more in class, watch fewer films, wish our due dates didn't coincide with your biology exam—let me know in class, after class, in an email... however you feel comfortable. If we can make a reasonable change, we will.

### **Commit to a writing schedule**

Writing is a practice—just like soccer, basketball and music. Just like those endeavors, writing loves habit (even though you may dread it). Set aside a time of day, every day to write. Give yourself a consistent goal (page count, time spent, your choice) and stick to it—even when it sucks.

It takes time to build a habit and more time to build permanent muscle memory (writing works you brain the way weights and sport training work muscles). Use this class as an excuse to build good writing habits.

### **Notes about what this class is not...**

#### **This is not a critical theory course**

Yes, it is important and interesting that Charlie Chaplin (to name one) was a womanizer who used his camera in very phallic ways—but that's not the point of this course.

This course is about how filmmakers get you to laugh, cry and want more, more, more.

#### **This is not an Aristotelean exegesis (did I use that word right?)**

In his groundbreaking, insider secrets of Hollywood tell-all, *Poetics*, Aristotle says:

*A story that is whole has a beginning, middle and an end. The beginning is the very thing which does not necessarily follow something else but after which something else naturally follows or happens. The end, in contrast, is the very thing that happens after something else either as a necessary result or, is most common companion, but after which nothing else occurs.*

To which Melvin Kaminsky (aka Mel Brooks) reportedly said:

***"So does a piece of shit!"\****

We will not spend time studying what others have said about art, drama, story, etc. There are other courses for that. You are going to learn how to observe and unlock how things work for yourself, in your terms—then put it to work.

#### **This is not therapy**

Or counseling. Or journalling. Discovering oneself can be very therapeutic and wonderful. For you. And your therapist... maybe your loved ones. No one else cares.

UNLESS you know how to make them care... and that's what we're going to learn. If you've experienced trauma, suffering, horrors beyond belief—I'm deeply sorry. Let's turn them into art for an audience—a really big one.

**This is not a lighting, acting, directing, sound design or editing course**

We're only interested in testing our ability to create the core elements of story. Does the script hold our interest or bore us to death? Why? Do you believe the lines, the characters, the action? Why?

By writing and testing your work—and helping the rest of the class do the same—you'll develop the skills you need to create an irresistible story on paper that other film professionals (or fellow students) will want to make.

## Recommended Reading

I've found the following books about writing, art and screenplays useful in my career. They are not required for this course, but you may find them worth your time. I've included links to them on Amazon or on the web if they're in the public domain, but you can probably find most of them in (or through) the UCCS Library.

[Linda Barry: What It Is](#)

[Robert McKee: Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting](#)

[Robin Russin and William Missouri Downs: Screenplay: Writing the Picture, 2nd Edition](#)

[Howard Suber: The Power of Film](#)

[Hal Ackerman: Write Screenplays that Sell: The Ackerman Way](#)

[Strunk and White: The Elements of Style](#)

[Anne Lamont: Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life](#)

### **Scripts (and movies) that we won't study in class**

[Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder, D.M. Marshman, Jr.: Sunset Boulevard](#)

[Billy Wilder and I.A.L. Diamond: The Apartment](#)

[Billy Wilder: Pretty much every script he wrote](#)

[MARIO PUZO and FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA: The Godfather](#)

[Bud Schulberg: On the Waterfront](#)

[Bud Schulberg: A Face in the Crowd](#)

More as we go...