“I like the end of the writing process very much. The actual physical business of sitting and writing, I despise for about the first four-fifths of any project. Then when I get into what I think of as the home stretch, where I’ve solved eighty percent of the problems and I’ve picked up a lot of momentum, I’ll have the time of my life because at that point the characters become alive, the story is sort of a juggernaut – you know, it’s a living, breathing entity. That’s the only part I enjoy. The blank page – I’ll circle around that sucker for weeks.”

JAMES CAMERON on writing “The Terminator”

“We had to go through all this because my screenplay was so f*#ed up. They were going to do it in spite of the structure, but I had to rearrange efficiently and take all the slack out. It was just like shuffling cards. I had to have the director and the producer help me with this, I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. I mean I wrote some great stuff but they had to tell me how to put it together...I wrote thirteen drafts of it.”

RICHARD PRICE on rewriting his first produced screenplay, “The Color of Money” for director, Martin Scorsese

“If you think that perhaps you should cut, cut.”

David Mamet, Oscar nominated screenwriter for “Wag the Dog” and “The Verdict”

This semester you will write a SECOND DRAFT and a POLISH of the first draft screenplay that gained you admission into this class. Since a step deal for a project in development generally calls for two drafts and a polish, your progress will conform to the minimum professional requirements of a Writer’s Guild contract for a writer-for-hire.

Through table readings and story sessions, you will hear your work and receive feedback that will help you devise a strategy for your rewrite. We will consider typical second draft concerns, including structure; flow; set-ups and pay-offs; character arcs; length; natural-sounding dialogue; ways to make the script more active; image systems and maximizing the script’s visual potential. Now that you’ve done the hard work of “getting something on the page”, you are ready to begin the exciting work of discovering ways to fully explore your choices.

We will begin by reading the first draft of a script that was destined to win an Academy Award, Robert Towne’s Chinatown and compare it to the film directed by Roman Polanski. How did the project change from the screenwriter’s initial pass to the story on the screen? What can you
learn here about the writing process, about writing to please yourself vs. writing for production, about discovering and fully exploring the potential locked within the initial concept?

Each week afterwards, you will receive a screenplay of a current movie of note. The more good scripts you read, the more you will come to understand what makes a good read. This will improve your own writing. Make a point of reading these scripts with a pen in hand—analyze their structure, make note of choices you find especially effective, let these scripts inspire you as you rewrite your own screenplay. Send me an email each week with your impressions.

Each week we will table read a draft written by a member of the class. You will be assigned a specific day to present your script. On other weeks, your feedback on your classmates’ scripts will be a vital part of our work. You will learn as much from understanding what works or doesn’t in the drafts of others as you will when your own work is presented.

Our workshop will meet as follows:

WEEK 1 (1/28) Screening of Chinatown. Successful elements to consider as you assess your rewrite of your script. READ the Chinatown script for next week. THINK about your rewrite strategy for your screenplay.

WEEK 2 (2/4) DISCUSS Chinatown changes from page to screen. Benefits and pitfalls of writing “on spec”. Distance and the “pet project”. Screenwriter as collaborator. INTRODUCE YOUR PROJECT TO THE CLASS—CAN YOU TELL YOUR STORY IN 2 OR 3 SENTENCES, SUCCINCTLY? What’s your logline? ARTICULATE your goals for the next draft of you screenplay. READ (or reread) Chapter 6 (Structure), Chapter 11 (Genre) and Chapter 14 (Rewriting) in Screenplay: Writing the Picture. WRITE A TROUBLESHOOTING CHART FOR YOUR SCRIPT AND HAND IT IN NEXT WEEK.

WEEK 3 (2/11) FIRST TABLE READING! Feedback. READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK: Writing Screenplays for Fun & Profit by Lennon & Garant. REWRITE during the week by addressing at least one major goal and one lesser concern from your troubleshooting chart, such as plot holes, character arcs and/or pacing.

NO CLASS ON 2/18, SCHOOL CLOSED FOR PRESESIDENTS’ DAY. MAKE AN APPOINTMENT WITH ME FOR A MANDATORY INDIVIDUAL STORY CONFERENCE THIS WEEK.

WEEK 4 (2/25) TABLE READING. REWRITE by tackling another issue on your Troubleshooting chart.

WEEK 5 (3/4) TABLE READING. KEEP WORKING ON YOUR REWRITE.

WEEK 6 (3/11) TABLE READING. KEEP WORKING ON YOUR REWRITE.

SPRING BREAK. No class on 3/18. NO EXCUSES, WRITE!!! YOU HAVE A WONDERFUL IDEA AND IT’S WORTH TAKING IT TO THE MAX, YES?
WEEK 7 (3/25) TABLE READING. KEEP REWRITING.

WEEK 8 (4/1) WE TABLE READ, WE GIVE GREAT FEEDBACK, WE DRAW INSPIRATION AS WE WORK ON OUR OWN SCRIPTS...WE GET BETTER AND BETTER, YES...?

WEEK 9 (4/8) TABLE READING. ***FINISH YOUR SECOND DRAFT AND HAND IT IN NEXT WEEK!!!*** Congratulations.

WEEK 10 (4/15) TABLE READING. If you finished your second draft, put it in a drawer and do not look at it for a week. (This is not a typo!) Do you find yourself thinking, maybe even dreaming about your story/world/characters? If so, jot down those notes to yourself. Otherwise, give yourself and your characters a well-earned break so you can return to your work with fresh eyes.

WEEK 11 (4/22) TABLE READING. ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK—READ YOUR SECOND DRAFT ALL THE WAY THROUGH, IN ONE SITTING. TAKE NOTES AFTERWARDS.

WEEK 12 (4/29) How did a bit of critical distance help you see your story in new ways? How does the screenwriter stay “fresh”? Let’s talk. And let’s hear another TABLE READING. FOR NEXT WEEK, WRITE A NEW TROUBLESHOOTING CHART FOR YOU SCRIPT AND START ON YOUR POLISH.

WEEK 13 (5/6) TABLE READING. KEEP REWRITING.

WEEK 14 (5/13) TABLE READING. WRAP UP QUESTIONS. What do you want to do next?

REQUIRED READING

Writing Screenplays for Fun & Profit by Lennon & Garant (Simon & Schuster)

Assigned screenplays TBD

GRADING
50% Second Draft
30% Polish
10% Generous and engaged participation
10% Showing up (more than one absence may lower grade—we are all in this TOGETHER)