WRITING FOR THE SCREEN I

ARTS-UG1570-001/Fall 2015

The Gallatin School, New York University

Thursdays 6:20 – 9:00 p.m.

Room 501, 1 Washington Place

Instructor: Selma Thompson

Office Hours: Friday 9:00 a.m. -1:00 p.m., Room 431

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"'The cat sat on the mat' is not the beginning of a story; but 'the cat sat on the dog’s mat' IS."

John Le Carre, best-selling author

"...clarify each character arc and...sprinkle the story with the small details that bring a script to life."

Michael Arndt, Academy Award-winning screenwriter

You can do this!

The goals of this course are to hone your understanding of dramatic structure and send you to your computer to write a first draft of a feature-length screenplay. Do the hard thinking now, put in the effort, and you just may find you love writing your script...

You must make a commitment to yourself to reserve several hours a week to write. If you cannot do so, then this course may not be for you, at least not now. Good writing is fueled by momentum; strive to WRITE EVERY SINGLE DAY.

A look at our schedule should make clear that sitting at your laptop on a regular basis will result in a finished first draft!

By semester’s end, you will have mastered screenplay formatting as well as the essential professional skill of giving and receiving constructive feedback.

Welcome.

Let’s get busy...
09/03 WEEK 1

DISCUSSION: Why watch a movie? The “Movie Moment”. What makes a good screenplay (an ongoing exploration)?

SCREENING: Adaptation.

READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK: Screenplay: Writing the Picture by Robin R. Russin & William Missouri Downs (Chapters 1, 3, 4) AND Adaptation by Charles Kaufman & Donald Kaufman.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT DUE NEXT WEEK: 3 POSSIBLE STORY IDEAS—A PARAGRAPH OR TWO EACH. INCLUDE…MAIN CHARACTER…DRAMATIC NEED…SETTING/WORLD…POSSIBLE 3 ACT STRUCTURE. DO YOU KNOW YOUR ENDING?

09/10 WEEK 2

DISCUSSION: Screenplays are structure. Preliminary discussion of your story ideas.

READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK: Screenplay: Writing the Picture (Chapters 5, 6, 7, 9).

WRITING ASSIGNMENT DUE NEXT WEEK: REFINE OR REPLACE YOUR STORY IDEAS. WHAT SECONDARY CHARACTERS AND SUBPLOTS SUPPORT YOUR THEME/ILLUMINATE YOUR PROTAGONIST’S JOURNEY?

09/17 WEEK 3

DISCUSSION: How to stepsheet. In-class reading and analysis of Little Miss Sunshine by Michael Arndt.

READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK: Ordinary People screenplay by Alvin Sargeant AND Screenplay: Writing the Picture (Chapters 8, 9, 10).

WRITING ASSIGNMENT DUE NEXT WEEK: Stepsheet the First Act of your story to Plot Point One.

09/24 WEEK 4

DISCUSSION: Pros and Cons of using Flashback and Voice-over. The screenplay as a “good read”. Uses of Secondary Characters. Characterization. Present stepsheet work, as time allows.

READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK: Screenplay: Writing the Picture (Chapter 11).

WRITING ASSIGNMENT DUE NEXT WEEK: FINISH YOUR STEPSHEET. What is the Midpoint? How does the story build to Plot Point Two?
REQUIRED TEXTS:

Screenplay: Writing the Picture by Russin & Downs

Writing Movies For Fun & Profit: How We Made a Billion Dollars at the Box Office and You Can Too by Lennon & Garant

Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama by David Mamet

A NOTE ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website (http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html).

Seriously, claim somebody else’s screenplay as your own? Or pass off someone else’s contributions to the script as yours? How stupid would that be? I apologize for insulting your intelligence by even bringing this up, except the school (rightly) requires the above paragraph be included on all syllabi. As a Lifetime Member of The Writers Guild and a member of their Credits Arbitration Committee, please know that stealing people’s work is taken as seriously, if not more so, within the film industry as it is here at Gallatin.

GRADING:

30% Attendance and Participation + 20% Stepsheet + 50% First Draft Script.

More than one absence may result in a reduced grade. Your voice is needed in our workshops. We are all in this together.

Achievement “above and beyond” will be lauded—as will hard work, intelligence, and a helpful attitude toward your fellow screenwriters (i.e. the people with whom you may later work professionally).