

YALE UNIVERSITY – Summer 2024
FILM S-350 -- Introduction to Screenwriting
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INTRODUCTION

I spent 17 years working with and for the Los Angeles studios and ran over 5000 pitch meetings mainly with the studio heads of production. I also produced a film which I sold to Warner Bros. In addition, I helped to get a number of low budget and micro-budget films made.

I started my career in the story department at MGM where I was trained as a story analyst, whereupon I worked for several studios and production companies. I was subsequently headhunted by a literary agency in Beverly Hills. As an agent, I found an early script by Quentin Tarantino in the rejection pile and became his first co-agent. I also discovered Andrew Niccol (*The Truman Show*, *Gattaca*, etc.), Iris Yamashita (*Letters from Iwo Jima* for Clint Eastwood) and several others. All of these either won Academy Awards or were nominated.

I have long been interested in the careers of screenwriters and how these have changed over the last 50 years. Before the mid-1970's key script decisions were made between the writer, the director, producer and maybe a studio executive. After *Jaws* in 1975 and the identification and highlighting of replicable keys to commercial success in screenplays, (as well as the advent of script gurus), writers started to find themselves in conference rooms with up to a dozen people to please and on the receiving end of endless script notes. In 1987, Dawn Steel was appointed the head Columbia pictures. She replaced a lot of the cinephile executives with MBAs, lawyers, marketing and distribution executives and accountants. All the studios followed suit and the job of the screenwriter changed forever.

From the perspective of screenwriters, the question became, how to navigate these changing circumstances to secure a creatively and financially rewarding career. This is very much the subtext for this course.

You may at this stage ask yourselves why you should care about the Hollywood based film industry when you would be quite happy to write for another outlet. The bottom line is money. You want to become a professional screenwriter and have a long career, i.e., pay your mortgage etc. If you are good enough, Hollywood will come calling and if it does you had better be prepared. The rates of pay are also radically different. A client of mine, shortly after optioning a script to MGM, had his quote increase significantly and was paid \$750,000 to do a re-write on someone else's script. One month's work.

One of the most essential objectives during this course is finding your voice. It is who you are through your life experience, the books you have read, the people who have influenced you and much more. Hampton Fancher spent years as an actor before writing the *Blade Runner* script. This is what he told me recently: “Acting and writing are the same thing. Very, very important. I was always interested in writing. I learned about writing through acting”. David Peoples (Academy Award: *Unforgiven*) shared with me that he was an editor for many years etc. It is also about your worldview, the kind of storyteller you are, your personal, distinct way of telling a story. Great scripts like *Blade Runner*, *Unforgiven*, *Deer Hunter*, *L.A. Confidential*, *The Usual Suspects* or pretty much any script by Steven Zaillian, Christopher McQuarrie, Brian Koppelman have very strong voices.

KEEP A JOURNAL

If you have not already done so, as an aspiring writer for screen or really any genre of literature, keeping a journal is highly recommended. Just as a visual artist keeps a sketchbook handy, a songwriter has a pad handy for lyrics that might come with a spark at any time, or a composer who scratches out a few bars as a fragment to build upon later, a journal will come in handy. We will be reading a lot of material and engaging with screenplays and films and a journal will help you keep all of your thoughts straight, reactions and critiques about themes, characters, story arcs, continuity, dialogue that sounds authentic and the overall objective of what makes watching great cinema not only entertaining but also thought provoking. Hopefully, you will also be inspired to document your reactions and responses to readings, especially those that deal with the broader issue of the creative process. More importantly, a journal will become a useful personal chronicle of your creative process and how you evolve as a screenwriter, not just for this course but for what follows after the summer session ends.

READINGS AND COURSE MATERIALS

Please note the assignments and readings that need to be completed for the next class meeting. This will be adjusted according to the total number of students enrolled in the workshop and the time dedicated to workshopping your written materials.

At the first meeting, we will divide the class into smaller study groups who should plan on meeting outside of the scheduled class times and discuss the assigned scripts which will be part of the class discussion as well as practice pitching your ideas for screenplays prior to class sessions. We will be covering a lot of ground and I want to ensure you have an in-depth introduction to an exciting but also complex and intensely competitive field.

There will be a curated selection of materials that I have collected over the years as an industry veteran with many connections in the Hollywood and international film industries, who also has extensively researched materials for books and articles and conducted many interviews with major

screenwriters (e.g., Hampton Fancher, the lead writer for *Blade Runner*). This packet will be a valuable resource not just for this course but also for you as you take your next steps in your career and continue to develop your writing voice. There will also be a compact collection of screenplays in PDF format. All of these materials will be made available with digital access for downloading.

READING LIST

You will quickly learn why these texts have become hugely important to the industry. There also are important caveats that we will discuss about their influence and impact.

Linda Seger: *How to Make a Good Screenplay Great*

Christopher Vogler: *The Writer's Journey*

Alexander Ross: *The Evolution of the Hollywood Blockbuster: Blockbusted*

Robert McKee: *Story*

Joseph Campbell: *The Hero's Journey*

(Optional) Jonathan S. Feinstein: *The Nature of Creative Development*

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND ASSIGNMENTS

The requirements for successful completion:

1. This course is set up as an interactive workshop so attendance of all ten sessions is mandatory, per YSS requirements
2. Class participation (15%) and the writing assignments (as specified in the items below, for a total of 85%) will comprise your final grade.
3. The following written assignments will be considered in your final grade: **Mid-term packet of your work in progress**, as specified below, 30%; **Final screenplay draft** (eight pages minimum, which will be revised through various iterations), 35%, **in-class creative exercise** (10%) and **final self-assessment essay** (10%).

MIDTERM FOLDER SHOULD CONTAIN THE FOLLOWING ITEMS:

1. Four revised versions of the narrative premise for your screenplay proposal. The first two versions should be one page maximum. The third and fourth versions should add a concise paragraph outlining the ending you envision for your story.

2. The first page of your screenplay in standardized industry format, with a revision of that first page included.
3. Profiles of the main protagonist and antagonist in your proposed story. Make these people compelling and multi-dimensional. Bring them to life. The antagonist makes your protagonist interesting because he/she forces the protagonist to stretch and locate abilities that they never knew he/she possessed.
4. Write a stream-of-consciousness dialogue between the protagonist and antagonist. This will be sparked by a creative exercise we will conduct in class. You can be creative in the format that you want to address this assignment.
5. Outline each scene-by-scene outline of your story using slug lines to mark each scene, followed by a brief description of what should happen in that scene. Make it clear and concise but include details to show how you visually plan to pull your story to the climax.
6. Write two (2) script coverages on two of the full-length screenplays you have read for the course. This will include the top sheet, synopsis and comment. I will outline the specific requirements for this assignment.

ORGANIZE all the material into a pocketed folder and be prepared to hand it in for a mid-term grade. Be sure to have your name on each individual assignment and clearly identify each assignment and cluster the pages of that specific assignment as a separate unit stapled together in your folder.

When done, you are ready to embark on the writing of your 8–12 page screenplay.

Good luck!

FINAL SUBMISSION

This will be due at the end of the course, to be submitted with the final draft of your short screenplay. Your essay should address the following questions:

1. Discuss how your screenplay has evolved from the first draft and how you decided which changes you made in your story development and characters.
2. With open candor, what do you believe specifically are the key strengths and weaknesses in the screenplay draft you have submitted?
3. With the experiences of this course, what have you discovered about yourself as an aspiring screenwriter and where do you see yourself going after this course, especially in the next five years.

4. As you have discovered your voice as a screenwriter, what stories intrigue and motivate you the most in exploring for possibilities as a film script?

Please attach this analysis to the final draft of your screenplay and hand it in.

CLASS DISCUSSIONS

The way discussions work best is if we make them interactive, so if there is something you want to find out more about or don't understand, ask. This is a safe space, there is no such thing as a "stupid question". The only thing I ask for is that if you are going to provide each other feedback, do so with kindness. Be constructive. Saying that something does not work is not particularly helpful. Provide a suggestion on how to improve the project. Also, be supportive. Hopefully you will not only have made friends amongst your peers here, but life-long support for each other's writing. Part of the research for my book on blockbuster films looked at the generation of filmmakers that came out of the University of Southern California's film school or hung out with them like Spielberg (he couldn't get in!) in the mid-1970s. You had John Milius, Robert Zemeckis and Bob Gale (who wrote *Back to the Future*), Randal Kleiser (*Grease*) and George Lucas. These people became firm friends and supported each other through their lives. None of them would have gotten as far as they have without that support.

COURSE CALENDAR

Please note that some adjustments may be made.

Reading: The foreword & introduction to *The Evolution of Hollywood's Calculated Blockbuster Films: Blockbusted* by Alexander Ross

Seminar 1; Instructor Introduction. Student introductions: Your reasons for doing the course and your objectives. Q&A on the reading assignment. Lecture: A history of the evolution of the screenwriting profession. The life of a professional screenwriter. How to succeed in the film & TV industries.

Reading: Linda Seger: *How to Make a Good Screenplay Great*. Chapters four, five and six. Writing a screenplay that will be produced.

Seminar 2; Q&A on the reading assignment. What are good sources for script ideas? Open class workshop to share and discuss student ideas for their screenplay premises. Come prepared to pitch your idea. Student and instructor feedback. Lecture: How to constructively critique a screenplay.

Reading: Linda Seger: *How to Make a Good Screenplay Great*. Chapters seven, eight, nine and ten. How to create real and unforgettable characters.

Seminar 3; Q&A on the reading assignment. 30 minute in-class stream of consciousness writing assignment. Students will read out the excerpts that work best for them. Discuss evolution of your characters. Student and instructor critique and discussion. Lecture: Finding your way of creating unique and impactful characters that seasoned actors will want to play. Q&A on selecting, committing to your script premise and engaging with it.

Assignment: Watch *The Godfather* (1972) and/or read the script. Take some characters from the film and expand them. Make them your own over two plus screenplay pages.

Seminar 4; Q&A on the writing assignment. Do the characters drive the story or the story the characters? How did *The Godfather* come about? What creative choices did Coppola make against studio advice? Why did audiences relate to such an extent? Student and instructor critique and discussion. Lecture: Writing a screenplay outline. Q&A on your scriptwriting progress.

Reading: Chapter 2, The Evolution of Hollywood's Calculated Blockbuster Films: Blockbusted, Alexander Ross (2023). Read Robert McKee's *Story* and Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* at will.

Seminar 5; Screenwriting Gurus: Help or hindrance? Major Q&A. All students to bring at least 5 questions each. Lecture: Be a storyteller and not a clone. Learn the rules of screenwriting and how to break them, to establish your voice. Q&A on your scriptwriting progress.

Reading/Viewing: Watch *Blade Runner* (1982) and read the script (whatever version you prefer). Read the opening chapter to my forthcoming book on the film.

Seminar 6; In depth case study: The flawed making of a masterpiece. The creative conflict that made *Blade Runner*. Lecture: Surviving Ridley Scott. Screenwriter Hampton Fancher and David Webb Peoples on working with the director. This will include never before seen interview footage and a Q&A with one of the filmmakers. Q&A on your scriptwriting progress.

Reading: Alexander Ross, Creative decision making within the contemporary Hollywood studios. *Journal of Screenwriting*

<https://alexrossmentor.com/creative-decision-making-within-the-contemporary-hollywood-studio-system-by-dr-alex-ross/>

Seminar 7: Q&A on the reading. Talk: Script Coverage: How Film Production Companies and Studios Assess your Script. The journey of the screenwriter and his script. Q&A on your scriptwriting progress.

Reading/Assignment: Circulate all scripts. Write constructive critiques on each to be read out in class.

Seminar 8; Each script is provided with feedback on how to improve it by students and instructor. Q&A.

Assignment: Work on your scripts.

Session 9: Workshopping Student Screenplays: in-depth critiques with seasoned actors (TBA)

Reading: Linda Seger: *How to Make a Good Screenplay Great*: Epilogue. Alexander Ross: *The Evolution of the Hollywood Blockbuster: Blockbusted*. P. 237. Conclusion.

Session 10: Lecture: Breaking into the Film Industry and Staying There. How to get a job that will help evolve your writing skills and open industry doors. Become a filmmaker and not a life-style industry groupie. Key mistakes to avoid. Q&A on the way forward.

Final Draft of Script and Self-Assessment Essay Due.

A number of relevant feature films and shorts will be screened during the course. These will be followed by discussions.