

Fall 2017  
T 2-4:50 (CAC 237)

Dr. Cary Elza  
Office: M/W 2:30-4:30, CAC 311  
[Cary.Elza@uwsp.edu](mailto:Cary.Elza@uwsp.edu)

## **COMM 351: Writing for the Media: SCREENWRITING**

### **Course Description**

This course is designed to introduce you to the process of thinking about, writing, editing, and collaborating on screenplays for feature film. We'll cover the basics of structure, format, narrative and plot development, character development, and principles of conflict, and we'll think about audience, commercial considerations, and broader questions about where ideas come from and how we can develop them into tangible products. As we go, we'll be watching movies and reading screenplays in order to get a feel for structure, tone, character, genre, setting, and dialogue.

### **Course Goals**

By the end of this course, students should:

- Identify and employ basic elements of successful media writing, including theme, narrative, voice, format, and audience.
- Compose articulate, grammatically correct work in a variety of genres or modes.
- Demonstrate critical reading and writing skills.

But in addition to these basic learning outcomes, we've got a few other goals:

- Think and create imaginatively within limits—work with RULES
- Willingly and thoughtfully edit, criticize, and rewrite both your own work and others'
- Collaborate to create and compose, to appraise and judge, and to make each work the best work it can be
- Produce creative work on a self-imposed (in addition to externally-imposed) schedule—in other words, think and create on your own time, making time for reflection and imagination

### **Requirements (total of 100 points)**

Participation/attendance		15%
In-class exercises ( <i>including revisions and critiques</i> )	20%	
Homework assignments		20%
Beat Sheet		10%
Step-Outline/Treatment		10%
Final Screenplay		25%

### **Grading Scale**

A: 94-100	B-: 80-83	D+: 67-69
A-: 90-93	C+: 77-79	D: 64-66
B+: 87-89	C: 74-76	F: 0-63
B: 84-86	C-: 70-73	

### **Readings**

There is one textbook for this course: Robert McKee's *Story*. It is available for rent and purchase through the bookstore. All other readings will be on D2L as PDF files or links. Readings should be completed by the day under which they're listed.

You are welcome to purchase **Final Draft** for this class, but it's expensive. The computer lab in CAC 301 has it installed on all computers for your use, though! You might also consider using a free screenwriting program like **Celtx** (<http://celtx.com/index.html>). The catch with Celtx is that there's a limited free trial of the whole program, and then after 30 days, you will have functionality limited to just the screenplay formatting function (i.e., if you use the program's index card function, **keep exporting it to PDF, because after 30 days that goes away, along with all your information**). I don't care HOW you get your screenplay in the correct format—technically, you can do all of this successfully in Word—but it's up to you if you want to use software to make your life easier.

### Attendance Policy

This class is collaborative, and only meets once a week. Attendance is mandatory, and will be taken at the beginning of class. **If you are late, it is your responsibility to come up and make sure I've marked you down as present.** If you need to miss class for an emergency, let me know *in advance*. Absences will be excused on a case-by-case basis. You are allowed one unexcused absence, then after that each unexcused absence reduces your participation grade by a point.

**Furthermore, it's incredibly important that you show up prepared for class—do the readings, complete your assignments, and think actively about your screenplay even when you're not in class! If you're not prepared, you're hurting yourself AND your collaborators, and you're betraying your script and making it sad.**

### Assignments

**Exercises:** These will be evaluated on the degree to which you fulfilled the assignment, the quality of the writing (clarity, correctness, engaging voice), and the freshness and complexity of the ideas. This goes for in-class assignments (which will typically be graded on a check system) and homework assignments (which will typically be graded on a 5-point system).

**Beat Sheet and Step-Outline/Treatment:** We will discuss the format of these assignments in more detail as we go along. But like your shorter exercises, they will be graded on the degree to which you adhered to the assignment, the quality of the writing, and the quality of the ideas. Each student will complete his or her own Beat Sheet, but once we get past this stage in the screenwriting process, you will have the option to work in pairs or teams.

**Final screenplay:** Your screenplay, whether you complete it by yourself or with a partner, will be evaluated on these criteria:

1. length (more on this as we proceed, but your goal is a feature-length film)
2. adherence to the standard screenplay format
3. quality or cleverness of the story, the story's ability to grab a reader's attention
4. formal logic of the narrative (regardless of whether your structure is classical or independent or a form all your own)
5. depth and originality
6. compelling theme
7. quality of the writing: clarity, correctness, voice

### **Requirements for Written Assignments**

Papers must be typed, page-numbered, and adhere to the proper format, when applicable. I reserve the right to deduct points for violations of these requirements. Late assignments drop by 10% for each 24 hours it's late, whether it's the weekend or a weekday (i.e., a 100-point paper one day late will be penalized 10 points before I grade it). Extensions may be granted on a case-by-case basis for personal emergencies, but ONLY if you ask me IN ADVANCE of the actual due date.

### **Class Environment**

Students are expected to contribute to a respectful, productive learning environment. This includes being on time, being attentive, participating in class discussions, and being nice to everyone, regardless of their views. Re: technology: rest assured that it's pretty easy to tell whether a student is actually taking notes on a laptop or checking the internet. If you're going to use a laptop or tablet, please use it for class purposes, and please switch cell phones to silent. Also, no texting in class, please. Any violation of the above will impact your attendance/participation grade.

### **Guidelines for Assessing Participation Grades**

- Tardiness; degree and frequency
- Not just frequency, but quality of comments. Is it evident that the student has done the readings and engaged with the material?
- Consideration and respect for other students and their points of view
- Engagement with the class (i.e., sleeping or excessive talking to others while the professor or another student is speaking)
- Technology use: disrespectful or reasonable?

### **Disability Statement**

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal law requiring educational institutions to provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. For more information about UWSP's policies, check here:

<http://www.uwsp.edu/stuaffairs/Documents/RightsRespons/ADA/rightsADAPolicyInfo.pdf>

If you have a disability and require classroom and/or exam accommodations, please register with the Disability and Assistive Technology Center and then contact me at the beginning of the course. I am happy to help in any way that I can. For more information, please visit the Disability and Assistive Technology Center, located on the 6th floor of the Learning Resource Center (the Library). You can also find more information here: <http://www4.uwsp.edu/special/disability/>

### **Statement of Academic Integrity**

UW-Stevens Point values a safe, honest, respectful, and inviting learning environment. In order to ensure that each student has the opportunity to succeed, we have developed a set of expectations for all students and instructors. This set of expectations is known as the Rights and Responsibilities document, and it is intended to help establish a positive living and learning environment at UWSP. Click here for more information:

<http://www.uwsp.edu/stuaffairs/Pages/rightsandresponsibilities.aspx>

Academic integrity is central to the mission of higher education in general and UWSP in particular. Academic dishonesty (cheating, plagiarism, etc.) is taken very seriously. Don't do it! The minimum penalty for a violation of academic integrity is a failure (zero) for the assignment. For more information, see the UWSP "Student Academic Standards and Disciplinary Procedures" section of

the Rights and Responsibilities document, Chapter 14, which can be accessed here:  
<http://www.uwsp.edu/stuaffairs/Documents/RightsRespons/SRR-2010/rightsChap14.pdf>

**Terms of Enrollment**

This syllabus is a contract. By taking this class, you agree to the policies listed here. I reserve the right to change the syllabus, with timely notification to students.



**CLASS SCHEDULE**

**Week One: INTRODUCTION**

Tuesday, 9/5



**Week Two: THE BASICS**

Tuesday, 9/12

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 1-2  
              --*Romancing the Stone* script (Diane Thomas)  
Screening: *Romancing the Stone* (1984, Robert Zemeckis, 106 min)



**Week Three: SETTING AND GENRE**

Tuesday, 9/19 **LOGLINE ASSIGNMENT DUE**

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 3-4



**Week Four: CHARACTER AND CONTROLLING IDEA**

Tuesday, 9/26 **STORY WORLD ASSIGNMENT DUE**

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 5-6  
              --*Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* script (Jeffrey Price and Peter Seaman)  
Screening: *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988, Robert Zemeckis, 104 min)



**Week Five: OVERVIEW OF STRUCTURE**

Tuesday, 10/3 **CHARACTER ASSIGNMENT DUE**

Readings: --*Story*, Ch 19



**Week Six: STRUCTURE II**

Tuesday, 10/10 **CONTROLLING IDEA ASSIGNMENT DUE**

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 7-8

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### Week Seven: STRUCTURE III

Tuesday, 10/17 **BEAT SHEET OF YOUR FILM DUE**. Groups/pairs meet; start working on revisions to Beat Sheet; discuss step-outline

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 9  
--Snyder, "Building the Perfect Beast"

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### Week Eight: STRUCTURE IV (SCENE DESIGN AND FORMAT)

Tuesday, 10/24 **REVISED BEAT SHEET DUE**

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 10  
--*Casablanca* screenplay (Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein and Howard Koch)  
Screening: *Casablanca* (1942, Michael Curtiz, 102 min)

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### Week Nine: STRUCTURE V (SCENE ANALYSIS AND COMPOSITION)

Tuesday, 10/31 **EMAILED PICTURE OF IN-PROGRESS STEP-OUTLINE DUE**

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 11 (p 252-271), Ch. 12  
--WORK ON STEP-OUTLINE. Also, pitch your film to anyone who will listen. See if you can get anyone to invest....

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### Week Ten: STRUCTURE VI (CRISIS, CLIMAX AND RESOLUTION)

Tuesday, 11/7 Groups/pairs meet; **STEP-OUTLINE DUE AT END OF CLASS**

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 13-14

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### Week Twelve: EXPOSITION; CHARACTER; DIALOGUE

Tuesday, 11/14 **COVER SHEET DUE**; peer review of step-outlines

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 15 and 17  
--WORK ON SCRIPT

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### Week Thirteen: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Tuesday, 11/21 **FIRST FOUR PAGES DUE**; Groups/pairs meet

Readings: --*Story*, Ch. 16  
--WORK ON SCRIPT

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**Week Fourteen: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS, CONT.; THE PITCH**

Tuesday, 11/28 **OPENING SCENE(S) (AT LEAST 12 PAGES) DUE**; in-class activity on pitches

Readings: WORK ON SCRIPT

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**Week Fifteen: TABLE READS; PEER REVIEW**

Tuesday, 12/5 **EVERYBODY PREPARES SCRIPT FOR READING**

Readings: WORK ON SCRIPT

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**Week Sixteen: BUSINESS OF SCREENWRITING; MORE TABLE READS/PEER REVIEW**

Tuesday, 12/12 **EVERYBODY PREPARES SCRIPT FOR READING**

Readings: WORK ON SCRIPT

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**Week Seventeen: FINAL TABLE READS AND WRAP-UP**

Tuesday, 12/21 8-10am: **TURN IN SCRIPTS; TABLE READ OF WINNING SCRIPT(S)**