University of North Texas

Department of Media Arts

MRTS 4500.001 5500.001 / 3 Credit Hours / Mon 5:00-8:50P / RTPF 282

- **Phones shall remain OFF during all designated class time. Do not text message in class. Do not check incoming calls in class. Do <u>not</u> leave class to attend to your phone. These are the actions that will absolutely kill your participation and engagement grade.**

- **Please have an additional notebook and pen for notes.**

- **In this course, the use of GenAI tools is not permissible. No matter the approach, any attempt to represent GenAI output as a student's own work will be considered fabrication, cheating, and/or academic dishonesty as determined on a case-by-case basis.**

Contact Information

Professor – Jason Balas

Office – RTFP 238

Email – jason.balas@unt.edu

Office hours – by appointment

Course Objectives
Completion of Feature-Length Screenplay

- **Able to shape and complete screen story in 90 to110-page manuscript.**
- **Understanding of effective script revision—the writing is polished and free of typos or grammatical errors.**

Proper Screenplay Formatting

- **Solid understanding of screenplay formatting. Line spacing, margins, sluglines, etc. are all correctly placed.**
- **Learn an appreciation of "white space." Excellent understanding of what constitutes visual information, as opposed to internalized, "non-shootable" information.**

Plot & Character Development

- Ability to construct strong central character who is driven by a strong, relatable, yet high-stakes motivation.
- Able to create compelling narrative through truly coherent and logical cause-and-effect story sequencing.
- Able to create interesting characters that emotionally resonate with an audience.
- Articulate "writer's voice" effectively creates mood and tone that best illustrates content.
- Ability to create a compelling, informative, content-specific "film world."
- Solid ability to reveal new information in unexpected ways and compelling situations.

Description

The job of the writer is to tell a compelling story. Directors put words on screen—script to screen. Writers put words on paper—ideas to page. Leave the camera movements and acting tips to the director. Concentrate on concept, setting, rhythm, structure, situation and character. In this class you are writers.

Throughout the term, you will work on the completion of a feature-length original screenplay. All work is read aloud and critiqued by the class and myself. Be prepared for this. Most feedback will address problems and how to fix them. Don't expect rave reviews, you are not a professional writer. The pros don't take beginning scriptwriting courses. But they once did. You will make mistakes, which is fine. However, if you are not willing to open your mind to criticism and fix mistakes, you will not improve.

Important – Take notes on lectures, critiques, and screenings. Readings will also be assigned throughout the semester. Much of the Final Exam will be based on lecture notes and chapter readings.

Materials

- Required Text – Your Screenplay Sucks, 100 Ways to Make It Great, William M. Akers Paperback: 287 pages

  Publisher: Michael Wiese Productions (August 1, 2008) Language: English ISBN-10: 1932907459

- Access to screenwriting software (Final Draft, Celtx, etc.)
- Printer and paper

Teaching Philosophy

My basic belief about teaching is that it should be personalized and individualized. In light of this, I bring a hands-on approach to teaching, focusing on individual students and their projects. Much of our time in screenwriting, for example, is spent in writing, reading scripts in class, and working with instructor and peer critiques. Although I do include lectures about writing and structure in my screenwriting courses, I've found that students appreciate the personalized analyses of their work and the opportunity to work out the particulars of their stories through class participation and discussion.

My overarching goal in screenwriting is to help students internalize the skills of the work, so that the strategies of writing become second nature to them. This enables students to create their own stories in their own voices.

ASSESSMENT & GRADING

Exercises	
Screenplay Concept	**20 points**
Step Outline/Character Bio	**20 points**
Script	
ACT I	**75 points**
ACT II	**75 points**
Complete Script w/ ACT III	**75 points**
Tests	
Final Exam	**150 points**
Participation/Engagement	**75 points**
TOTAL	**490 points**

MRTS 5500.001 Graduate-Level Additional Requirement

Formal Script Coverage (Feature Script) 50pts

Due Friday May 8 2026 (.pdf emailed to professor by 11:59pm)

540pts COURSE TOTAL

Due Dates

Screenplay Concept—1/26/26

Step Outline/Character Bio—2/9/26

Course Exam—5/4/26 5:30PM – 7:30PM

Complete Script w/ ACT III—5/7/26 (upload to Canvas > Assignments by 11:59PM)

*Individual script due dates will be established at the beginning of the semester. Once in place, your personal writing deadlines must be adhered to.

Assigned Readings

Jan/Feb– "Act I Storytelling" p.4-120

Mar/Apr– "Act II Physical Writing" p.128-239

Week 1 — Jan 12

- ✓ **Syllabus**
- ✓ **Course Introduction**
- ✓ **Theme > Plot > Character > Character Arc**
- ✓ **Character Want vs Need**
- ✓ **3-Act Structure**
- ✓ **Opening Scene**
- ✓ **"Screenplay Concept" exercise assigned**

Week 2 — Jan 19

- ✓ **UNT CLOSED - MLK Jr. Day**

Week 3 — Jan 26

- ✓ **"Screenplay Concept" Exercise DUE**
- ✓ **In-class reading and discussion of "Screenplay Concept" Exercise**

✓ **Assigned reading: begin "Act I Storytelling"**

Week 4 — Feb 2

✓ **Continuation of in-class reading and discussion of "Screenplay Concept" Exercise**

✓ **ACT I readings are scheduled/assigned**

✓ **Situation Exercise assigned**

✓ **Step Outline assigned**

Week 5 — Feb 9

✓ **Step Outline/ Character Bio DUE**

✓ **In-class reading and discussion of select Step Outlines**

Week 6 — Feb 16

✓ **ACT I BEGINS**

✓ **Three ACT I in-class readings**

✓ **Each script followed with critique and discussion**

✓ **ACT II readings are scheduled/assigned**

Week 7 — Feb 23

✓ **Three ACT I in-class readings**

✓ **Each script followed with critique and discussion**

Week 8 — Mar 2

✓ **Three ACT I in-class readings**

✓ **Each script followed with critique and discussion**

Week 9 — Mar 9

UNT CLOSED – Spring Break

Week 10 — Mar 16

- ✓ **Three ACT I in-class readings**
- ✓ **Each script followed with critique and discussion**

Week 11 — Mar 23

- ✓ **Three ACT I in-class readings**
- ✓ **Each script followed with critique and discussion**

Week 12 — Mar 30

- ✓ **ACT II BEGINS**
- ✓ **Three ACT II in-class readings**
- ✓ **Each script followed with critique and discussion**
- ✓ **Course Exam Review (formatting)**

Week 13 — Apr 6

- ✓ **Three ACT II in-class readings**
- ✓ **Each script followed with critique and discussion**
- ✓ **Assigned reading: begin "Act II Storytelling"**
- ✓ **Course Exam Review (formatting)**

Week 14 — Apr 13

- ✓ **Three ACT II in-class readings**
- ✓ **Each script followed with critique and discussion**

Week 15 — Apr 20

- ✓ **Three ACT II in-class readings**
- ✓ **Each script followed with critique and discussion**

✓ **Course Exam Review (concepts)**

Week 16 — Apr 27

✓ **Three ACT II in-class readings**

✓ **Each script followed with critique and discussion**

Week 17—May 4

✓ **Course Exam 5:30PM-7:30PM**

COURSE POLICIES

Use your laptop at home to type up final, polished work. In the classroom, use a legal pad or notebook for in-class writing assignments and notes.

- **You may not use any form of AI (artificial intelligence) for required work in this class. It is cheating.**
- **All writing submitted must be typed and properly formatted.**
- **All work is read aloud with the entire class.**
- **Don't let page counts fool you. It far more difficult to write concise, compelling stories than long, meandering ones.**
- **You must attend class. You get (1) one unexcused absence without penalty. After one unexcused absence, you lose a 1/3 of your final letter grade each time you do not attend.**
- **2 lates=1 absence**
- **Attendance is taken at the start of every class period.**
- **Do not cheat, ever. The school has guidelines for dealing with this. I will follow these guidelines, it would be unfair to the other students not to.**
- **Do not eat in class.**
- **Participation is mandatory.**
- **Each writing assignment carries a late policy**
- **If you are tardy, find a seat as quickly and quietly as possible. Do not interrupt class to find out your status on that day's roll sheet. Address it with me after class.**
- **Syllabus is subject to change.**

Mobile Phone Policy

Please TURN OFF AND PUT AWAY all mobile phones. It is disrespectful and distracting.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

UIT Help Desk: http://www.unt.edu/helpdesk/index.htm

The University of North Texas provides student technical support in the use of Canvas and supported resources. The student help desk may be reached at:

Email: helpdesk@unt.edu
Phone: 940.565-2324
In Person: Sage Hall, Room 130
Hours are:
- **Monday-Thursday 8am-midnight**
- **Friday 8am-8pm**
- **Saturday 9am-5p**
- **Sunday 8am-midnight**

- **Blackboard technical requirements: https://clear.unt.edu/supported-technologies/blackboard/blackboard-technical-requirements**
- **Other related hardware or software necessary for the course: such as headset/microphone for synchronous chats, word processor, etc.**

- **Canvas technical requirements: https://clear.unt.edu/supported-technologies/canvas/requirements**
- **Other related hardware or software necessary for the course: such as headset/microphone for synchronous chats, word processor, etc.**

Student Academic Support Services

- **Code of Student Conduct: provides Code of Student Conduct along with other useful links**
- **Office of Disability Access: exists to prevent discrimination based on disability and to help students reach a higher level of independence**
- **Counseling and Testing Services: provides counseling services to the UNT community, as well as testing services; such as admissions testing, computer-based testing, career testing, and other tests**
- **UNT Libraries**
- **UNT Learning Center: provides a variety of services, including tutoring, to enhance the student academic experience**
- **UNT Writing Center: offers free writing tutoring to all UNT students, undergraduate and graduate, including online tutoring**
- **Succeed at UNT: information regarding how to be a successful student at UNT**

UNT POLICIES

Academic Integrity Policy

Academic Integrity Standards and Consequences. According to UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity, academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to

expulsion from the University. [Insert specific sanction or academic penalty for specific academic integrity violation.

ADA Policy

UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one's specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. For additional information see the ODA website at disability.unt.edu.

Emergency Notification & Procedures

UNT uses a system called Eagle Alert to quickly notify students with critical information in the event of an emergency (i.e., severe weather, campus closing, and health and public safety emergencies like chemical spills, fires, or violence). In the event of a university closure, please refer to Blackboard for contingency plans for covering course materials.

Retention of Student Records

Student records pertaining to this course are maintained in a secure location by the instructor of record. All records such as exams, answer sheets (with keys), and written papers submitted during the duration of the course are kept for at least one calendar year after course completion. Course work completed via the Blackboard online system, including grading information and comments, is also stored in a safe electronic environment for one year. Students have the right to view their individual record; however, information about student's records will not be divulged to other individuals without proper written consent. Students are encouraged to review the Public Information Policy and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) laws and the University's policy. See UNT Policy 10.10, Records Management and Retention for additional information.

Acceptable Student Behavior

Student behavior that interferes with an instructor's ability to conduct a class or other students' opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student's conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The University's expectations for student conduct apply to all

instructional forums, including University and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. The Code of Student Conduct can be found at deanofstudents.unt.edu/conduct.

Access to Information - Eagle Connect

Students' access point for business and academic services at UNT is located at: my.unt.edu. All official communication from the University will be delivered to a student's Eagle Connect account. For more information, please visit the website that explains Eagle Connect and how to forward e-mail: eagleconnect.unt.edu/

Student Evaluation Administration Dates

Student feedback is important and an essential part of participation in this course. The student evaluation of instruction is a requirement for all organized classes at UNT. The survey will be made available during weeks 13, 14 and 15 [insert administration dates] of the long semesters to provide students with an opportunity to evaluate how this course is taught. Students will receive an email from "UNT SPOT Course Evaluations via IASystem Notification" (no-reply@iasystem.org) with the survey link. Students should look for the email in their UNT email inbox. Simply click on the link and complete the survey. Once students complete the survey they will receive a confirmation email that the survey has been submitted. For additional information, please visit the SPOT website at http://spot.unt.edu/ or email spot@unt.edu.

Sexual Assault Prevention

UNT is committed to providing a safe learning environment free of all forms of sexual misconduct, including sexual harassment sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. Federal laws (Title IX and the Violence Against Women Act) and UNT policies prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, and therefore prohibit sexual misconduct. If you or someone you know is experiencing sexual harassment, relationship violence, stalking, and/or sexual assault, there are campus resources available to provide support and assistance. UNT's Survivor Advocates can assist a student who has been impacted by violence by filing protective orders, completing crime victim's compensation applications, contacting professors for absences related to an assault, working with housing to facilitate a room change where appropriate, and connecting students to other resources available both on and off campus. The Survivor Advocates can be reached at SurvivorAdvocate@unt.edu or by calling the Dean of Students Office at 940-565- 2648. Additionally, alleged sexual misconduct can be non-confidentially reported to the Title IX Coordinator at oeo@unt.edu or at (940) 565 2759.