

ADVANCED SCREENWRITING

MRTS 4500 - Fall 2026

Instructor: Josh Gilbert (josh.gilbert@unt.edu)

Tuesdays 5:30pm-9:20pm, RTFP 282

Office Hours: Mon/Tues 4:30p-5:30p & by appt.

Course Description and Goals:

The main goal of this class is to make you an accomplished screenwriter. What exactly does that mean? Well, what it doesn't mean is that you should plan on walking out of here with a lucrative contract from a major studio for the first draft of a script you wrote over the course of a semester... as nice as that would be. Being "accomplished" has nothing to do with money or fame (very few screenwriters are household names, so if that's what you're hoping for, you're on the wrong end of the business). It has to do with working hard to create a unique and captivating story with fascinatingly original characters and crafting it all into a script that has the potential to be shaped into an impressive showcase of your skill and talent. And after that, you go and do it all again. And again. And again.

Because that's what accomplished screenwriters do.

One of the first steps you can take toward that goal is actually pretty simple – you need to finish something. Many would-be writers have a lot of things they've started but just never got around to "FADE OUT". In all honesty, most *professional* writers have quite a few of those unfinished projects sitting around haunting them too. So, whether you've completed a full feature length script before, or if you've got a laptop full of false starts, or if you've never written anything more than a 3 page short – this class is going to help move your writing to the next level.

In terms of specific course objectives, you will learn the process of developing a concept from a simple one-line idea, to outline, to a properly formatted original feature spec script (90-110 pages). Along the way, you will also gain experience in the critical art of notes (both giving and taking), providing script coverage, and working on methods for mapping out subsequent rewrites.

So to be clear, this class isn't just about getting you to crank out 100 pages. It's about helping you become a more effective storyteller, continuing to develop and refine your creative voice, learning to properly evaluate others' work as well as your own, and giving you an opportunity to have one more arrow in your quiver once you head out of here. Doing all that, how could you not feel pretty darn accomplished?

Materials:

Any scripts and/or readings in this course will be available on Canvas or physical handouts.

There are NO REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS for this class. That doesn't mean you shouldn't have a "how to" screenwriting book or two in your library. We will be going over proper formatting, structure, development, etc. in class, but having something you can reference at home is invaluable.

A couple reasons why I don't assign one particular book:

- #1) Screenwriting books are plentiful, and for the most part, very similar in terms of basic content. They vary in how information is presented, so rather than force one on you, feel free to look around and I will bring up some examples in class, but let me know if you have questions about any others you come across.
- #2) Instead, you are better off buying screenwriting software (see below).

The only equipment you need in class is paper, pen, and a laptop/pad for reading scripts.

Screenwriting Software:

For this class, it is required that you use screenplay formatting software. This is to save time and headaches and so that you get used to how proper scripts are written. If you're interested in screenwriting enough to take this advanced class, you should be using **FINAL DRAFT**...

Final Draft is the industry standard. This is the one you're going to be using for pretty much every industry job you ever have. If you were to buy it normally, it's not cheap – FD retails at almost \$250. Fortunately, they constantly run “sales” (right now it's \$199), but as a student, you can get it for \$99 (I also have a code for an additional \$10 off which will be posted in the Week 1 Module.) If you don't want to buy it, they also offer a semester-long free trial which I will also include a link to in the module.

Because there are so many different programs out there, all of us using the same one will make passing scripts around a heck of a lot easier. (Assignments will need to be saved and turned in as PDFs only.)

How the Class will work:

ASSIGNMENTS

- As a general rule, assignments will be due the day before class (**Mondays at NOON**). This is so I have time to review your work, organize distribution for peer notes, etc.
- It is crucial that you turn things in on time. Grades will be reduced **one letter grade** if not turned in by the deadline, and **one additional grade** every subsequent day after that.
- The reason for all the emphasis on not being late:
 1. It may mean you can't get peer feedback because of time restraints
 2. It could delay work being done on other group/class projects
 3. Most of all, because deadlines are essential for writers.

If you don't turn scripts in on time, it will not only affect your ability to keep any job you have, but there's a good chance you'll have a hard time getting another one after that.

NO OLDIES BUT GOODIES

If you've got bits of scripts you've worked on in the past, or ideas you've been tinkering with for years hoping to have a reason to sit down and actually finish... that's wonderful. You definitely should, but not for this class. Everything you produce in here should be BRAND NEW and ORIGINAL.

By starting something completely from scratch, you're less likely to burn out on your enthusiasm for it (you're going to be doing A LOT of writing in here, so the chances are high), and you can always apply the lessons and experience you gain while in this class to any other projects you work on afterwards.

POLICY ON A.I.

While technology can be an exciting and fascinating thing, it can also be detrimental. Until there are more ways to regulate, organize and be transparent about the use of artificial intelligence, it will be a major issue for the entertainment industry at large, and a particularly destructive one (creatively and financially) for writers.

For that reason, the use of generative AI tools **are not permitted**. Any use of AI tools for assignments will be considered a violation of UNT's Academic Dishonesty Policy. Seriously – use this time to push yourself to become the best storyteller you can be. I promise, your own unique creativity and voice is ultimately going to be far more valuable than leaving it up to a computer. So why cheat yourself out of the experience? Easy answer: don't do it.

GRADING:

<u>Weekly Assignments</u>	(25%)
<u>Script Assignments</u>	(50%)
<u>Peer work/Class Contribution</u>	(25%)

ATTENDANCE / PARTICIPATION:

Being present is important – and it's just as imperative to be involved. The more engaged you are, the better off we'll all be. Not that I want you to come to class if you're exploding from eating too much infected lettuce (sorry if that's too graphic), but the way this class works, there is no easy way to "make up" a session you missed. So, do your best to always be here.

Whatever the case, I NEED TO KNOW AT LEAST 24 HOURS BEFORE CLASS if you will not be able to attend. The main point here is communication.

Attendance Policy: 2 missed classes will require a conference to discuss overall grade.
3 will automatically reduce overall by one letter grade, 4 or more will be failure of the course.

Lateness: If you're late in a writers room, they will find someone else who wants the job more than you -- so get in the habit now. Class starts on time, so don't be late. (2 lates = 1 absence.)

Course Schedule and Assignments:

This schedule is subject (but not likely) to change. Any alterations will be discussed in class and/or updated on Canvas. Make sure to check for announcements and keep an eye on your email as well.

Week 1 -	Overview and Introductions ASSIGNMENT: Survey, Concepts
Week 2 -	Topics: Genres, Idea Focus ASSIGNMENT: One Pager
Week 3 -	Topics: Research and Acts ASSIGNMENT: Beatsheets
Week 4 -	Topics: Building The Story ASSIGNMENT: Outlines
Week 5 -	Topics: Giving and Taking Notes ASSIGNMENT: Revisions
Week 6 -	Topics: Lessons and Inspirations ASSIGNMENT: Script (Part 1)
Week 7 -	Topics: Reviewing The Most Important Page ASSIGNMENT: Script (Part 2)
Week 8 -	Topics: Act 1 Discussions ASSIGNMENT: Script (Part 3)

Week 9 -	Topics: The Most Troubling Act ASSIGNMENT: Script (Part 4)
Week 10 -	Topics: Twists and Turns ASSIGNMENT: Script (Part 5)
Week 11 –	Topics: The End of the Tunnel ASSIGNMENT: Rough Pass, Experts #1
Week 12 –	Topics: Table Read #1 ASSIGNMENT: Experts #2
Week 13 –	Topic: Table Read #2 ASSIGNMENT: Experts #3
Week 14 -	Topic: Table Read #3 ASSIGNMENT: Rewrite
Week 15 -	THANKSGIVING WEEK
Week 16 -	Final Class

Additional Opportunities:

Becoming a better writer isn't just about writing. The more scripts you read – from the great to the not-so-great – the more it will help you in your own development. So, I will have a Canvas folder available with a TON of scripts for you to read, if you choose to do so. (If there are any scripts in particular you'd like to read, let me know and I'll look for a digitized copy.)

Class Policies:

Pretty much every script that's ever been sold and/or produced has been subject to notes. Lots of them. That's how it works in Hollywood, and that's how it works in this class. So aside from your own writing, you will also be required to offer constructive, beneficial assessments of your fellow classmates' material. But unlike many studio executives, producers, directors, stars and other fellow writers you may deal with in the future, this class will be a friendly and encouraging place. (Keep in mind - they're all going to have a chance to give you notes as well - so be honest, but be kind.)

Getting feedback from multiple sources will not only help you learn to be a better writer, it will also help everyone else as well. Have faith. You might even enjoy it. Eventually.

Use of Student Work:

A student owns the copyright for all of their own work done in this class and neither the University nor any other student is entitled to use it without the writer/creator's permission. Otherwise, student work may only be used for future class demonstration only if all of the following criteria are met:

- The work is not used in its entirety.
- Use of the work does not affect any potential profits from the work.
- The student is not identified but work is identified as student work.

Academic Dishonesty Policy:

Okay, so up until fairly recently, this wasn't much of an issue in this class – just because the point of everything you do in here is meant to explore your creativity. **A.I. has changed things.** The use of generative AI tools are not permitted. Any use of AI tools for assignments or in-class work may be considered a violation of UNT's Academic Dishonesty Policy: *According to UNT Policy 06.003, 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 sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University.*

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. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom/Zoom session/discussion 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 discussion groups, etc. deanofstudents.unt.edu/conduct.

ADA Statement:

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.

Student Perceptions of Teaching Effectiveness (SPOT):

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 and 14 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. 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 www.spot.unt.edu or email spot@unt.edu.

Technical Assistance

Part of working in the online environment involves dealing with the inconveniences and frustration that can arise when technology breaks down or does not perform as expected. Here at UNT we have a Student Help Desk that you can contact for help with Canvas or other technology issues.

UNT Help Desk: UNT Student Help Desk (<http://www.unt.edu/helpdesk/index.htm>)

Email: helpdesk@unt.edu

Phone: 940-565-2324

In Person: Sage Hall, Room 130

Walk-In: 8am-9pm.

Laptop Checkout: 8am-7pm

Phone: Sun: noon-12am, Mon-Thurs:
8a-12a, Fri: 8am-8pm, Sat: 9am-5pm

For additional support, visit (<https://community.canvaslms.com/docs/DOC10554-4212710328>)

Student Support Services

UNT provides mental health resources to students to help ensure there are numerous outlets to turn to that wholeheartedly care for and are there for students in need, regardless of the nature of an issue or its severity. Listed below are several resources on campus:

- Student Health & Wellness Center (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellnesscenter>)
- Counseling and Testing Services (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services>)
- UNT Care Team (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/care>)
- UNT Psychiatric Services (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellnesscenter/services/psychiatry>)
- Individual Counseling (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services/services/individual-counseling>)

Other student support services offered by UNT include:

- Registrar (<https://registrar.unt.edu/registration>)
- Financial Aid (<https://financialaid.unt.edu/>)
- Student Legal Services (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-legal-services>)
- Career Center (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/career-center>)
- Multicultural Center (<https://edo.unt.edu/multicultural-center>)
- Counseling and Testing Services (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services>)
- Pride Alliance (<https://edo.unt.edu/pridealliance>)
- UNT Food Pantry (<https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/resources/food-pantry>)

Academic Support Services:

- Academic Resource Center (<https://clear.unt.edu/canvas/student-resources>)
- Academic Success Center (<https://success.unt.edu/asc>)
- UNT Libraries (<https://library.unt.edu/>) / Writing Lab (<http://writingcenter.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.

Prohibition of Discrimination, Harassment, and Retaliation (Policy 16.004)

The University of North Texas (UNT) prohibits discrimination and harassment because of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, disability, genetic information, veteran status, or any other characteristic protected under applicable federal or state law in its application and admission processes; educational programs and activities; employment policies, procedures, and processes; and university facilities. The University takes active measures to prevent such conduct and investigates and takes remedial action when appropriate.

Academic Freedom

UNT has a robust policy regarding academic freedom and academic responsibility. Crucially, this policy encompasses not only the rights of faculty members but also the rights “of the student to freedom in learning.” As a student in this classroom, therefore, you have the right to encounter and

debate new ideas, diverse forms of knowledge, and unfamiliar or contrary points of view. According to UNT policy, “it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive.” At the same time, to encourage the free exchange of ideas, and to ensure that your right to learn is protected, the tone for such discussion must always be civil and respectful; hateful or discriminatory speech will not be tolerated. For more information, please consult the full UNT policy at <https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-035>.

Audio/Video Recording

Although UNT is a publicly supported institution, our classroom is not a public space. Therefore, in order to protect the intellectual property and privacy rights of both faculty and students, video and audio recordings are prohibited during class. The exception is for students who have been granted explicit approval as an ODA accommodation. For more information, please consult the full UNT policy at <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access/faculty/faculty-guide/accommodations-explained/Audio-Recording-Faculty.html>. To protect everyone’s privacy, if you are in this class, you must agree to abstain from recording or taking screenshots of our Zoom calls, Canvas discussion board threads, or in-person discussions, etc.

Okay... let’s get writing.