

INTERMEDIATE SCREENWRITING - ONLINE

MRTS 4460 - INET

Fall 2023

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

Virtual Office Hours: Wed. 10a – 12p (via Zoom) + by appt.

Course Description and Goals:

Here's the dry version: *This course focuses on real-world practices for feature development and the vital art of rewriting.* What that really means is: *You're going to be writing a lot.* But I promise, that's a good thing.

Let's address the elephant in the room. This is a completely online class. So, you may be wondering if there's a chance you'll get to feeling a bit isolated. I mean, when you think about the life of a writer, it already seems like a pretty solitary existence, doesn't it? Sitting in a room, typing away. All alone. With nothing but your thoughts to keep you company. Totally by yourself...

First of all, yes. There is a part of the job that will mean you have to do the work of sitting at a keyboard. (And no, you don't want to relegate that part of the job to A.I.! We will address that later, but just know that for this class, it's not allowed.) But the good news is, writing for features and television is also a highly collaborative job. In order to go from words on a page to a fully produced, blockbuster movie or acclaimed TV series, there are going to be a lot of other people involved. (To be fair, the same goes for the worst movies and shows you've seen as well.)

For a writer to be a part of that process - and to stay a part of it for as long as possible - it's critical that you're able to tell the best story you can and be true to yourself, while at the same time, impressing as many of those other people as possible. It's about understanding which ideas to pursue, how to take notes (and how to make even the worst notes work in your favor) and most of all, pushing yourself to create. Constantly.

The even better news: we're all in this together. That means, you will be getting something a lot of writers DON'T often get – feedback. Trust me, it's a very valuable thing when you know both how to give it and how to use it.

Over the course of this semester, you will go through the process: going from initial ideas, to loglines, character development, treatments, outlines, first drafts and rewrites. At the same time, we will see how scenes evolve through notes, collaborations, and in various other fun/heartbreaking ways.

By the end of this class, each of you should have a better understanding of the skills and processes involved in professional screenwriting and see improvement in your ability and appreciation of the craft through practical writing experience.

*A Note On Writing for TV: While there are many similarities to narrative features, the process of writing for a Series has many differences and will not be focused on here. If you are interested in writing for television/cable/streaming, there is a specific TV Writing class (4465) that I teach as well. Lessons and practices you learn in this class will give you a jumpstart if you decide to continue on into television.

Materials:

There are NO REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS for this class. The fact is, there are so many “screenwriting” books out there (too many, really), it’s hard to pick what might be the best one for you because they all basically say the same exact things – just presented in different ways. I’m happy to discuss recommended books and materials, but for this class, they won’t be necessary.

All scripts and/or readings assigned for this course will be available on Canvas. Because not everyone has the same streaming services (and I don’t want to force anyone to spend more money than they need to), most of the movies assigned will be in the form of scripts. While I’d love it if you want to watch the movie too, it’s much more helpful at this stage to get in the habit of reading scripts rather than relying on a finished product. This way, you can focus on what the WRITER did, rather than the choices directors, editors, actors, and everyone else made.

A Word About Screenwriting Software:

It is required that you use screenplay formatting software. This will save yourself time and headaches, and it will get you in the habit of using what all other professional screenwriters use. Whichever program you choose, all assignments should be saved and turned in as **PDFs only**.

Final Draft is the industry standard when it comes to screenplay software. If you plan on writing for film or television, this is the one you’re going to be using in pretty much every job you have. It’s not cheap, however – retails at almost \$250... which is ridiculous. Fortunately, they constantly run “sales” (right now it’s \$199), but as a student, you can get it for \$99. While I highly recommend getting it if you want to continue writing scripts, there is no need to spend your money now...

By registering here: <https://trial.finaldraft.com/edutrial/> you can download and use Final Draft for free for the entire semester. Get it, use it - and make sure to save copies of all your work as PDFs before the semester is over. That way you can still open all the great work you’ve done afterwards.

There are other programs: Trelby (free, only Win/Linux), Celtx (\$7.50/month), FadeIn (\$50), etc., which can make script formatting easier, but you might as well give Final Draft a try while it’s free so you can familiarize yourself with it - it’s very simple and intuitive - and be prepared, if and when you need it.

How the Class will work:

Each week by 11:59pm Sunday night, you will see a new module open on Canvas, such as “Week 1.” Inside that module, you’ll get a Lesson Overview on what we are learning that week. Each week’s activities will be totally asynchronous, so you can complete all tasks in your own time.

After reading your Lesson Overview, you’ll have a list of Assignments for that week. Common Assignments could be:

- Posting in a group Discussion Topic
- Reading and responding to a script
- Writing scenes, outlines or other development elements
- Giving feedback on someone else's work, etc.
- (Sometimes I will also include "Optional " items, which are interesting/related to what we’re learning. Just in case you are looking to get a little more out of your week!)

Assignments:

All assignments are due as **PDF** uploads in Canvas and are due by 11:59 pm on Sunday nights.

Grading:

Peer Work & Discussion	[Peer notes, Discussion Posts]	25%
Weekly Assignments	[Shorts, Treatment, Outline, IP, etc.]	40%
First Draft	[1 st 15 pages]	15%
Rewrite	[Draft Pages, Treatment, Act 1 Outline]	20%

Even though most of us writers love procrastination (it's certainly one of my favorite things too) don't put things off to the last moment.

- Grades will be reduced one letter grade if not turned in by the deadline, and one additional grade every day after that.

It is crucial that you turn things in on time:

1. Because it may mean you don't get feedback from other readers if you're late
2. Because deadlines are essential for writers. If you don't turn scripts in on time as a professional writer, it can affect your ability to get another job after that.
3. And one other universal truth – *without deadlines, most writers would never finish anything.*

...And No Double Dipping

That means you cannot use a script you wrote for another class as an assignment in this class. Everything you produce in this class should be ORIGINAL.

POLICY ON A.I. - Something Important Enough To Mention More Than Once...

While technology can be an exciting and fascinating thing, it can also be detrimental. Until there are 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 (such as ChatGPT, etc.) are not permitted. Any use of AI tools for assignments will 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 a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University.*

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 as well as through email.

- Week 1 – 8/21 Topics:
▪ Formatting and Getting Started
ASSIGNMENTS:
▪ **Discussion – Intro Questions**
▪ **Read Script #1 and answer questions**
▪ **One Page Scene**
- Week 2 – 8/28 Topics:
▪ Story and Structure
ASSIGNMENTS:
▪ **4-5 Page Short**
▪ **3 Original Titles/Loglines**
- Week 3 – 9/4 -- *LABOR DAY* -- (No Class)
ASSIGNMENT:
▪ **Loglines Survey**
- Week 4 – 9/11 Topics:
▪ Character and Dialog
ASSIGNMENTS:
▪ **Research Doc**
▪ **Peer Feedback**
- Week 5 – 9/18 Topics:
▪ Plots, Subplots and Rewriting
ASSIGNMENTS:
▪ **Rewrite short**
▪ **Discussion Post**
- Week 6 – 9/25 Topics:
▪ Outlining
ASSIGNMENT:
▪ **3-Page Treatment**
- Week 7 – 10/2 Topics:
▪ Main Characters and Action
ASSIGNMENTS:
▪ **Treatment Feedback**
▪ **Short #2**
- Week 8 – 10/9 Topics:
▪ Loglines, Pitches, Pitch Decks
ASSIGNMENT:
▪ **Pitch Deck**

Week 9 – 10/16 Topics:

- Beatsheets and Outlines

ASSIGNMENTS:

- **Feedback on Pitch Decks**
- **Act 1 Outline**

Week 10 – 10/23 Topics:

- True Stories and Other Adaptations

ASSIGNMENT:

- **IP Concept**
- **First 5 pages of Original Script**

Week 11 – 10/30 Topics:

- Opening Scenes

ASSIGNMENT:

- **First 10 pages**

Week 12 – 11/6 Topic:

- Guns for Hire, Co-writing and Being Rewritten

ASSIGNMENT:

- **First 15 pages**

Week 13 – 11/13 Topic:

- Handling Notes

ASSIGNMENTS:

- **Script Notes**
- **Shorts Rewrite**

Week 14 – 11/20 -- *THANKSGIVING* -- (No Class)

Week 15 – 11/27 Topic:

- Industry Topics

ASSIGNMENT:

- **Rewrite Script, Act 1 Outline, Treatment**

Week 16 -12/4 Last Class

Class Policies:

In this course you will be sharing some of your work with other classmates. I understand how that's not always an entirely comfortable thing to do. But 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.

From the beginning of time, every script that's ever been sold has been subjected to notes.* That's how it works in Hollywood, and that's how it works in this class. So aside from your writing, you will also be required to offer constructive, beneficial assessments of your fellow classmates' material. Keep in mind - they're all going to have a chance to give you notes as well - so be honest, but be kind.

*Unless Clint Eastwood is directing your script. Then, as legend has it, he'll just shoot your first draft. You lucky dog.

Use of Student Work

A student owns the copyright for all work he or she creates within a 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 class demonstration if all of the following criteria are met:

- The work is used only once.
- The work is not used in its entirety.
- The student is not identified but the work is identified as student work.

The point being, all work done in this class is yours and yours alone.

Academic Dishonesty Policy:

Up until 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. So, once again... While technology can be an exciting and fascinating thing, it can also be detrimental. Until there are 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.

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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/online Discussion Boards, etc. 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. For additional information see the ODA website at disability.unt.edu

Retention of Student Records Policy:

Student records pertaining to this course are maintained in a secure location by the instructor of record. All records such as exams, answer sheets, and written papers submitted during the duration of the course are kept for at least one calendar year after course completion. Course work on the Blackboard online system is also stored in a safe electronic environment for one year. Students have the right to view their individual record; however, information about students' 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.

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 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 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.

UIT Help Desk: [UIT Student Help Desk site](http://www.unt.edu/helpdesk/index.htm) (<http://www.unt.edu/helpdesk/index.htm>)

Email: helpdesk@unt.edu **Phone:** 940-565-2324. **Laptop Checkout:** 8am-7pm

In Person: Sage Hall, Room 130 **Walk-In Availability:** 8am-9pm

Telephone Availability: Sun: noon-12am, Mon-Thurs: 8am-12am, Fri: 8am-8pm, Sat: 9am-5pm

For additional support, visit [Canvas Technical Help](#)

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 and Wellness Center](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center>)
- [Counseling and Testing Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services>)
- [UNT Care Team](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/care) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/care>)
- [UNT Psychiatric Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center/services/psychiatry) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center/services/psychiatry>)
- [Individual Counseling](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services/services/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) (<https://registrar.unt.edu/registration>)
- [Financial Aid](https://financialaid.unt.edu/) (<https://financialaid.unt.edu/>)
- [Student Legal Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-legal-services) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-legal-services>)

- [Career Center](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/career-center) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/career-center>)
- [Multicultural Center](https://edo.unt.edu/multicultural-center) (<https://edo.unt.edu/multicultural-center>)
- [Counseling and Testing Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services>)
- [Pride Alliance](https://edo.unt.edu/pridealliance) (<https://edo.unt.edu/pridealliance>)
- [UNT Food Pantry](https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/resources/food-pantry) (<https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/resources/food-pantry>)

Academic Support Services

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

Thanks for sticking with me through all of this! If you have any other concerns or comments, don't hesitate to let me know.