INTERMEDIATE SCREENWRITING

MRTS 4460   Spring 2021
Instructor: Josh Gilbert (josh.gilbert@unt.edu)
Office Hours: Wed. 10a – 12p + by appointment

Course Description and Goals:

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

Normally, when you think about the life of a writer, it probably seems like it's a pretty solitary existence. And a lot of the time, it can be - but 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 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.

Over the course of this semester, you will progress from loglines all the way through outlining and pitch creation, ending with a treatment and the first 15+ pages of an original screenplay. At the same time, we will learn 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.

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 essentially say the same things – just presented in different ways. I'm happy to discuss recommended books and materials for further study, but for this class, they won't be necessary.

All scripts and/or readings assigned for this course will be available on Canvas. Any movies discussed will either be made streamable through the Media Library or will be accessible through alternate outlets discussed in class. (*One free option I would suggest downloading if you don't have it already is Peacock, NBC's streaming service, which has a good assortment of films. Please let me know if you have any other recommendations for streaming choices, and any movies/scripts you'd like to discuss!*)

The only equipment you need for this online class is a computer, webcam, microphone and a quiet place (as quiet as possible, anyway) to write and join us for our weekly Zoom sessions.

A Word About Screenwriting Software:

It is recommended that you use screenplay formatting software to save yourself time and headaches. Whichever program you use, 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…

There are other programs: Trelby (free, only Win/Linux), Celtx ($7.50/month), FadeIn ($50), etc., which can help make script formatting easier if you don't have something already. Also, by registering here: https://trial.finaldraft.com/edutrial/ you can download and use Final Draft for free for the entire semester. While this free version doesn't let you save as PDFs, it's not a bad idea to at least try it out and familiarize yourself with it - it's very simple and intuitive – so you can be prepared, if and when you need it. (We can also discuss ways to use the free version of Final Draft in conjunction with software like Trelby so you can convert your work to PDF as well.)

How our Class will work:

I think it's safe to say that no one wants to be on a Zoom call for 3 hours straight, so as a general rule, I won't ask you to do that – but we will have weekly Zoom class meetings scheduled to start at the normal class time. These will typically run between 1-2 hours, with the remaining time to be spent watching assigned movies on your own, (films that we would have watched together in an in-person situation). There may be some occasions where pre-recorded videos and/or written material will be used instead of a live Zoom, but it's important for us to stay connected and interact as a class, so I will try to keep those to a minimum and will let you know ahead of time of any changes.

- **ASSIGNMENTS**
  All assignments are due before class time starts (unless otherwise noted). 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, and 2) because deadlines are essential for writers. If you don't turn scripts in on time in the real world, it can affect your ability to get another job after that. And one other universal truth – *without deadlines, most writers would never finish anything*.

- **PARTICIPATION**
  Being present for Zooms and staying involved between classes is important stuff and is a substantial part of your grade. We will use Canvas Discussions and Collaborations to give each other feedback and there will be discussion boards available for any other questions or topics you'd like to discuss. I am available via email as well if you'd like to schedule a conference or have any questions.

Please do let me know if you have any comments or concerns. Whatever your situation is, we can figure out a solution. Keep in mind, the more you engage with this class, the more you'll get out of it.

Grading:

Participation and Workshop	[Peer notes, Discussion Board, Zoom Sessions]	30%
Weekly Assignments	[Scene work, Loglines, Beat Sheets, etc.]	40%
Formal Pitch		10%
Final Rewrite – Treatment, Act 1 Outline and First 15		20%

The keys to doing well in this class are simple: do the work and stay involved. That's it.

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 -   Overview and Introductions. Topics: Formatting and general script analysis.
                  ASSIGNMENT: Survey, 3-page Character Short

Week 2 -   --MLK HOLIDAY-- (*No Zoom This Week*)
                  ASSIGNMENT: Peer Short notes, Movie #1

Week 3 -   Topics: Idea creation and Story, Inspiration and Loglines.
                  ASSIGNMENT: 4 Original Title/Loglines, Peer Short notes 2, Movie #2

Week 4 -   Topics: Character, Story and Theme. (Peer Logline Survey)
                  ASSIGNMENT: Logline Research, Short Genre Rewrite, Movie #3

Week 5 -   Topics: Dialog and Action
                  ASSIGNMENT: Monologue, Story Building Sheet, Movie #4

Week 6 -   Topics: Act structure and "Rules", story and character building.
                  ASSIGNMENT: 3-page Treatment, Peer Short Addition, Movie #5

Week 7 –   Topics: Pitching, style, core elements.
                  ASSIGNMENT: Peer treatment notes, Short Rewrite 2

Week 8 -   Topics: Specs vs Pitches, Industry discussion
                  ASSIGNMENT: Formal Pitch and written transcript (6 – 8 minutes)

Week 9 -   Pitch Prep / Conference Week (formerly known as Spring Break)
                  ASSIGNMENT: Finish Pitch, Survey, Movie #6

Week 10 -   Topics: Topic: Post Sale, Beatsheets and outlines. Pitch Session #1
                  ASSIGNMENT: Act 1 Outline, Movie #7

Week 11 -   Topics: True stories and adaptations. Pitch Session #2
                  ASSIGNMENT: IP Concept pitch, First 5 pages of Original script

Week 12 –   Topics: Opening scenes, script to screen
                  ASSIGNMENT: First 10 pages, Movie #8

Week 13 –   Topic: Movies by committee, Gun for Hire, Co-writing and being rewritten
                  ASSIGNMENT: First 15 pages, Group notes on assigned pages

Week 14 –   Topic: Peer Notes. Handling notes, pleasing people, and staying sane.
                  ASSIGNMENT: Rewrite "final" draft of opening and materials

Week 15 -   Last Class. Topics: Looking back and looking forward. The finishing ritual.

Additional Opportunities / Extra Credit:

As I've said, the more effort you put in, the more you will get out of this class. And frankly, times being what they are, most of us could use some positive stuff to focus on, right? If that's you, I'm happy to provide…

Along with the assignments every week as listed above, I will also have a folder available with a TON of scripts for you to read, if you choose to do so. (If there are any movie scripts in particular that you'd like to read but don't see listed, let me know and I will see if I can get a digitized copy). Becoming a better writer isn't just about writing. The more scripts you read – from the great to even the not-so-great – the more it will help you develop your own skills.

Most weeks, I will also assign a movie to watch. For the most part, each will be used for discussion in the following class. (We're talking about watching movies as part of your homework/class time here, so that's not too bad - it's not like I'm enforcing some inhumane torture or something.) There is value in watching all of them, even if you've seen them before. And reading their scripts wouldn't be a bad thing either!

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 be assured - this class will be a friendly and encouraging place. 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.

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.
- Use of the work does not affect any potential profits from the work.
- The student is not identified.
- The work is identified as student work.

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

Academic Dishonesty Policy:

We are required to say something about this, but for the most part, cheating is going to be a bit difficult in this class. That doesn't mean you should try it – please don't – but the nature of the writing we're going to be doing is pretty specific and it wouldn't serve you to try to substitute other people's work for your own.* Just so you're aware, if you do get caught, this is what happens:

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.

*Pay no attention to Quentin Tarantino.
   "I steal from every single movie ever made. I steal from everything."   "Great artists steal, they don't do homages."

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 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)

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

For additional support, visit Canvas Technical Help (https://community.canvaslms.com/docs/DOC-10554-4212710328)

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 and Wellness Center (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center)
- 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-wellness-center/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.

COVID-19 Impact
While attendance in Zoom classes is expected as stated previously, it is important for all of us to be mindful of the health and safety of everyone in our community, especially given concerns about COVID-19. Please contact me if you are unable to attend a Zoom class session due to a related issue regarding COVID-19 (or other health related issue). It is important that you communicate with me prior to being absent so we can make accommodations.

If you are experiencing any symptoms of COVID-19 (https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html) please seek medical attention from the Student Health and Wellness Center (940-565-2333 or askSHWC@unt.edu) or your health care provider. UNT also requires you to contact the UNT COVID Hotline at 844-366-5892 or COVID@unt.edu for guidance on actions to take due to symptoms, pending or positive test results, or potential exposure.

While attendance is an important part of succeeding in this class, your own health, and those of others in the community, is more important.

Transmission and Recording of Student Images in Electronically-Delivered Courses
No permission is needed from a student for their image or voice to be transmitted live via videoconference or streaming media, but all students should be informed when courses are to be conducted using either method of delivery.

Zoom sessions may be recorded by the instructor in case anyone needs to revisit the material or discussion, but will only be available to students who are enrolled in the class, and will be deleted when the course is over. 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, etc.

So, that's about it.

I want this class to be an enjoyable and rewarding experience, so if you have any concerns or comments, don't hesitate to let me know.