

Intro to Screenwriting Syllabus

Course Objectives:

Students will gain foundational skills in screenwriting, covering:

- Understanding the basics of storytelling for film, including structure, character development, and genre.
- Developing ideas and crafting original, engaging scripts for short films or feature films.
- Learning to “show, don’t tell” through visual storytelling techniques specific to screenwriting.
- Building practical writing skills such as dialogue, pacing, and subtext to enhance the readability and engagement of a script.
- Gaining confidence in revising, refining, and sharing their work.
- Exploring the steps for submitting a script, from preparation to festival entry and professional platforms.

Schedule:

16-Scene Course - Approximately 60 hours of coursework:

- Video Lessons
- Weekly Film or Script Reading Assignment
- Analysis of Screenplay Excerpts
- Weekly Writing Assignments and Script Development
- Final Project: Completed and Polished Script Ready for Submission

Content:

- Scene 1: Welcome to The Screenwriter's Edge
- Scene 2: Short Film vs. Feature Film
- Scene 3: Treatment, Title & Logline, Clarity of Purpose, Theme
- Scene 4: Character Development & Character Arc
- Scene 5: Setting & Atmosphere, Tone & Mood
- Scene 6: Story Structure, Beginnings & Endings, Climax & Resolution
- Scene 7: Dialogue
- Scene 8: Show, Don't Tell & Visual Storytelling/Writing Style
- Scene 9: Pacing

- Scene 10: Subtext & Subplot
- Scene 11: Conflict & Obstacles, Suspense & Surprise
- Scene 12: Emotional Engagement
- Scene 13: Writer's Block & Imposter Syndrome
- Scene 14: Collaboration
- Scene 15: Revisions
- Scene 16: Distribution

Course Outcome:

By the end of the *Intro to Screenwriting* course, students will:

- **Complete a Polished Script:** Each student will have a finished short or feature film script that has been thoughtfully developed, revised, and polished, ready for sharing or submission.
- **Master Screenwriting Fundamentals:** Students will gain a strong understanding of essential screenwriting elements, including story structure, genre, character development, setting, tone, and mood, as well as visual storytelling techniques.
- **Build Practical Writing Skills:** Students will be able to craft authentic dialogue, incorporate subtext, manage pacing, and create engaging scenes with appropriate conflict, suspense, and emotional depth.
- **Develop a Unique Voice and Style:** Through practice and feedback, students will refine their unique style and approach to storytelling, contributing to their confidence and voice as a writer.
- **Navigate the Script Development Process:** Students will be equipped to handle revisions, overcome common writing challenges, and accept constructive feedback to improve their work.
- **Understand Script Submission and Distribution:** Students will learn the basics of script distribution, from selecting film festivals to using professional platforms, and understand how to navigate the initial steps of entering the film industry as a screenwriter.

Scene 1: Welcome to Intro to Screenwriting

- **Topics Covered:** Course introduction, understanding the program layout, exploring initial ideas, and identifying genres.

- **What This Means:** This scene introduces students to screenwriting basics, covering how film stories are crafted differently than novels or other forms of writing. The focus will be on brainstorming ideas and exploring a range of genres like comedy, drama, action, horror, and sci-fi, helping students discover what type of story they want to tell.
- **Assignment: Read a Script** – Students are given a professionally written script, which could range from a well-known animated film to a superhero movie. Reading a script familiarizes them with screenplay format and shows them how to communicate action, dialogue, and visual detail in a concise way. Observing how scenes unfold, how characters interact, and how emotions are conveyed in the text is essential for understanding the language of film.

Scene 2: Short Film vs. Feature Film

- **Topics Covered:** Understanding the structure and scope of short films compared to full-length features; exploring “Start late, end early.”
- **What This Means:** Short films are focused stories (5–20 minutes) often with a single plotline, while feature films (70+ minutes) allow for more detailed characters, subplots, and a more elaborate journey. The principle “Start late, end early” means starting a scene at the last possible moment and ending it as soon as possible, keeping scenes concise and impactful.
- **Assignment: Develop a Script Idea** – Students brainstorm and choose between a short film or feature film for their script. They’ll outline a general story concept, identifying the main characters and central conflict. This choice sets the direction for the type of storytelling they’ll pursue, whether it’s a brief, powerful narrative or a more complex, extended story.

Scene 3: Treatment, Title & Logline, Clarity of Purpose, Theme

- **Topics Covered:** Writing a treatment, developing a title, writing a logline, defining clarity of purpose, and exploring the theme.
- **What This Means:** A treatment is a written summary of the film that includes the core idea and storyline. The title reflects the film’s central theme or tone, while the logline—a one- to two-sentence pitch—sums up the story in a captivating way. Clarity of purpose means understanding why the story is being told, and the theme addresses

the underlying message (like “overcoming fear” or “the power of friendship”).

- **Assignment: Begin the Treatment** – Students create the title, logline, and purpose of their story, then select a theme. The treatment helps students organize their ideas in a structured way, giving their story direction and meaning before they begin writing the actual script.

Scene 4: Character Development & Character Arc

- **Topics Covered:** Building dynamic characters, defining backstory, personality, and character arc.
- **What This Means:** Character development involves creating characters with unique personalities, motivations, and histories. A character arc is the transformation a character undergoes throughout the story, such as a hero overcoming self-doubt or a villain realizing the impact of their actions. Understanding the psychology behind a character makes them realistic and relatable.
- **Assignment: Character Bios** – Students develop detailed profiles for each main character, including traits, goals, and relationships with other characters. By clarifying each character’s purpose and journey, students can create characters who feel like real people, making the audience care about their fates.

Scene 5: Setting & Atmosphere, Tone & Mood (Worldbuilding)

- **Topics Covered:** Establishing the story’s time and place (setting), and creating the right atmosphere, tone, and mood for the story.
- **What This Means:** Worldbuilding is more than just setting—it’s about crafting a believable environment that enhances the story. Setting (location, time period, society) shapes how characters behave and how the story unfolds. Tone (the story’s attitude) and mood (the audience’s emotional response) create the story’s emotional landscape, such as a lighthearted mood in a comedy or a suspenseful tone in a thriller.
- **Assignment: Continue the Treatment** – Students expand their treatment to include setting details and describe the tone and mood. This helps them paint a vivid picture of their story world and decide how they want audiences to feel throughout the film.

Scene 6: Story Structure, Beginnings & Endings, Climax & Resolution

- **Topics Covered:** Structuring the story with a beginning, middle, and end; crafting a compelling climax and a satisfying resolution.
- **What This Means:** Story structure is the backbone of a screenplay, and a well-structured script engages audiences from start to finish. The beginning sets up the story and characters, the middle builds tension, and the end provides resolution. The climax is the story's most intense point, while the resolution ties up loose ends.
- **Assignment: Beat Sheet** – Students create a beat sheet, a roadmap of key scenes and moments in the story. This assignment guides them in planning out their story structure, ensuring each scene serves a purpose in advancing the plot or developing characters.

Scene 7: Dialogue

- **Topics Covered:** Writing authentic dialogue that reflects character personalities and advances the plot.
- **What This Means:** Dialogue in a script needs to sound natural while revealing character intentions, relationships, and conflicts. Unlike everyday conversation, screenplay dialogue is concise and purposeful.
- **Assignment: Script Analysis** – Students analyze dialogue from other scripts to identify examples of realistic, character-driven conversations. They observe how good dialogue adds depth to a scene, helping them craft believable and impactful dialogue for their own characters.

Scene 8: Show, Don't Tell & Visual Storytelling/Writing Style

- **Topics Covered:** Communicating story elements visually rather than explaining everything through dialogue.
- **What This Means:** Screenwriting is a visual medium, so it's important to "show" rather than "tell" details. This technique involves using actions, setting, and visuals to reveal information and convey emotions, allowing viewers to infer meaning without needing everything explained.
- **Assignment: Start Writing the Script** – Students begin writing their scripts, using actions and visuals to portray key information. This assignment encourages them to think about how scenes look and feel, rather than relying solely on dialogue.

Scene 9: Pacing

- **Topics Covered:** Managing the speed and flow of the story to keep it engaging.
- **What This Means:** Pacing is the rhythm of the story. It involves balancing action and dialogue, scenes of high energy with moments of calm, and ensuring the story doesn't feel too rushed or too slow. Good pacing keeps the audience's attention.
- **Assignment: Continue the Script** – Students add more scenes to their script, paying attention to the rhythm and flow. They learn how to adjust pacing by using shorter scenes for urgency or longer scenes to build suspense.

Scene 10: Subtext & Subplot

- **Topics Covered:** Creating layers in the story by including subtext (implied meaning) and subplot (secondary storylines).
- **What This Means:** Subtext adds depth to dialogue and scenes by implying what characters are feeling without them saying it outright. Subplots are side stories that complement or contrast the main storyline, giving the story more complexity.
- **Assignment: Write a Subtext Scene** – Students write a scene where the true meaning is hinted at rather than directly stated, practicing subtle storytelling techniques. They continue adding layers to their main script.

Scene 11: Conflict & Obstacles, Suspense & Surprise

- **Topics Covered:** Introducing tension through conflict, suspense, and unexpected twists.
- **What This Means:** Conflict drives the story by challenging characters, suspense keeps audiences on the edge of their seats, and surprise adds memorable moments. Together, they create an engaging story.
- **Assignment: Continue the Script** – Students add scenes that introduce obstacles for the characters, incorporating suspense and surprise to keep readers intrigued.

Scene 12: Emotional Engagement

- **Topics Covered:** Creating scenes that evoke strong emotions and resonate with the audience.

- **What This Means:** Emotional engagement makes a story memorable and impactful. By making characters relatable and situations intense, writers can evoke feelings in the audience, whether it's laughter, sadness, or excitement.
- **Assignment: Continue the Script** – Students build emotional depth in their scenes, focusing on moments that help the audience connect with the characters.

Scene 13: Writer's Block & Imposter Syndrome

- **Topics Covered:** Strategies for overcoming creative blocks and building confidence in writing.
- **What This Means:** Every writer faces blocks and self-doubt. This scene offers techniques to overcome these challenges, from brainstorming exercises to setting small goals and learning self-compassion.
- **Assignment: Continue Your Script** – Students complete more scenes, using techniques to overcome any creative challenges.

Scene 14: Collaboration

- **Topics Covered:** The importance of feedback and working with others.
- **What This Means:** Feedback is crucial in improving a script. Students learn to share their work, receive constructive criticism, and incorporate it to refine their scripts. Collaboration also prepares students for teamwork in professional settings.
- **Assignment: Get Feedback** – Students share their scripts with peers, family, or the instructor to gather insights. Applying this feedback strengthens the story and makes it more engaging.

Scene 15: Revisions

- **Topics Covered:** Reviewing, refining, and polishing the script.
- **What This Means:** Rewriting is where scripts are perfected. This scene covers how to identify weak areas, cut unnecessary scenes, and add details to improve the flow and readability.
- **Assignment: Revise Your Script** – Students revise their drafts based on feedback and a fresh look at their work. This process teaches them the importance of editing and improves their confidence as writers.

Scene 16: Distribution

- **Topics Covered:** Getting the script out into the world through film festivals, contests, and online platforms.
- **What This Means:** Understanding distribution helps students take the final step in screenwriting—sharing their work. They learn about entering festivals, using platforms like The Black List, and the journey to production.
- **Assignment: Plan Your Next Steps** – Students outline a plan for submitting their script, entering contests, or connecting with professionals. This empowers them to pursue screenwriting beyond the course.