SYLLABUS

INTRODUCTION TO SCREENWRITING I

Instructor: Marc Sedaka

Course Description:
If there’s one thing I’ve learned in Hollywood, it’s this: Everyone’s got a screenplay, but hardly anyone’s got a good one. The purpose of this class is to find out why that is, and, hopefully, to add your script to the short list. In order to do that, we will explore all the basic building blocks of screenwriting – from plot, to character, to structure, to screenplay. We will then use these tools to create a beatsheet/outline that will help guide you through the rest of your screenwriting journey.

Expectations:
Since much of our class time will involve reading each other’s work, I encourage you to do the following: Be constructive while critiquing. Remain open-minded while being critiqued. Don’t be afraid to participate. Don’t be afraid to ask questions.

Required Reading:
- “Screenplay” by Syd Field
- At least two other mainstream screenplays of your choice (written in original screenplay format). Many are available online at the following websites:
  http://www.imsdb.com
  http://sfy.ru/scripts.html?range=0

Suggested Reading:
- “Adventures In The Screen Trade” by William Goldman
- “How to Write A Movie In 21 Days” by Viki King
- “Save The Cat” by Blake Snyder
- “The Writer’s Journey” by Chris Vogel
- “Bird by Bird” by Anne Lamott
- “The War of Art” by Steven Pressfield

Grades:
25% Attendance
25% Class Participation
50% Homework Assignments (as judged by work effort and dedication to your own vision. NOT a subjective value of good or bad.)

Disclaimer: Due to the creative nature of this course, this syllabus should be viewed as merely a guideline and may shift focus or direction as the class warrants.
WEEK ONE: IN THE BEGINNING...

INTRODUCTION
- Instructor background
- Students’ backgrounds
- Goals for the course
- Review Syllabus

OVERVIEW/GETTING STARTED
- What it means to be a screenwriter
- General Rules

THE PREMISE
- What is a premise and what makes one good?

Reality Check: Can I see the poster?

ASSIGNMENT:

Come up with three premises for a movie, and make them as succinct, engaging and enticing as possible. Think of this as the one sentence logline Variety will use when it writes about your $1,000,000 spec sale -- the one that will make every other writer in town ask, “Now why didn’t I think of that?”

Choose two or three films that are similar to yours (in tone, character, or genre). One of these will serve as your “guide” film as you beat out your story.

WEEK TWO: SELECTING A PREMISE; EXPLORING CHARACTERS

WORKSHOP: PREMISES
- Read Premises
- Discuss (constructively!) what works and why

Creating Characters
- What makes a good protagonist?
- Fleshing out your characters
- Rounding out your cast

Reality Check: Who can play them and, perhaps more importantly, who would want to?

Assignments:
- Commit to a movie premise
• Write a brief character synopsis for your guide movie’s protagonist.

• Identify your movie’s protagonist and write a character synopsis of any length, in any style.

• Briefly describe the following:
  - What does he/she want? What does he/she need?
  - How does he/she grow, if at all?

• Briefly describe the antagonist, if any

WEEK THREE: DISCUSSING CHARACTERS; EXPLORING STRUCTURE

Workshop: Characters
• Read character sketches
• Discuss what works and why
• Encourage further development

Intro to Structure
• Analyzing the three act structure.

Reality Checks:
  - The all important “First Ten”
  - What are the “Trailer Moments?”

Assignment:

Identify the following for both your guide movie and your script:
  - The inciting incident
  - The two act breaks
  - The ending
  - The Spine (if you know it)

WEEK FOUR: MORE ON STRUCTURE; CRAFTING A STORY

Workshop: Three Act Structure
• Read class assignments
• Discuss what works and why

Exploring Story Elements:
• Sequence, Scenes, Beats and Dialogue
• Conflict and stakes

Reality Check: “Where are the setpieces?”
Assignment:

Break your story down even further, identifying all of the major beats. Do the same for your guide film.

WEEK FIVE: REVIEWING THE BEATSHEETS

Workshop and Class Time: Beatsheets
- Read class assignments
- Discuss in detail what works and why

General Considerations:
- Does the story flow?
- Do any beats seem repeated? Lacking?
- Do we “get” the genre, tone and target audience?
- Does the story live up to the premise?
- Is this a movie you’d want to see?

Assignment:
Continue to refine/develop your beatsheet based on what you’ve gained from the class.

WEEK SIX: FROM BEATSHEET TO OUTLINE

Workshop: Refined Beatsheets
- Re-read select beatsheets
- Discuss what’s changed for the better and why

Outlining: The Most Necessary Of Evils
- Is an outline in stone?
- How detailed should an outline be?
- What form should it take?
- How do you know when it’s done?

Surviving Act Two:
- Tip for making it through.

Assignment:
Outline the first act of your guide movie, paying close attention to set-up, character introduction and conflict.

Outline the first act of your movie with as much information as you know. And bear in mind that it’s better to be general and certain than specific and unsure.
WEEK SEVEN: FROM OUTLINE TO SCREENPLAY

Workshop: Act One Outlines
- Read select outlines
- Discuss what works and why

Writing The Screenplay:
- How to face the blank page
- Formatting
- Dialogue
- Other pearls of wisdom

Assignment:
Write the first ten pages your movie using proper screenplay formatting.

WEEK EIGHT: REWRITING

Workshop: The First Ten Pages
- Table read sequences
- Discuss what works and why

Rewriting:
- Writing is rewriting (or so I’m told)
- Handling notes
- How to rewrite
- Killing off your babies
- Applying that final polish

Assignment:
Rewrite your first ten pages based on class notes.
WEEK NINE: REVIEW OF FIRST TEN PAGES; WRAPPING UP

Workshop: Revised Pages
- Revisit the first ten pages, paying particular attention to how well the writer addressed his/her notes.

Dotting my I’s:
- This is my opportunity to address any loose ends or follow up on any topics that may have been overlooked in weeks past.

Q & A’s:
- This is your opportunity to ask all those burning questions that have been circling around your brain for the past eight weeks.

Guest Speaker:
- Assuming we haven’t had one yet, I will attempt to drag in some poor sap to talk about his or her business expertise. This may be an agent, a producer, or a fellow screenwriter with even more horror stories to tell.

Assignment:
Compile all your past assignments into your final beat sheet/outline. And be aware that this document is more for you to use as your future guide than for me to critique and grade. For better or worse, you’re on your own now!

WEEK TEN: THE BUSINESS OF HOLLYWOOD

The Working Screenwriter:
- The dream vs. The reality
- The writer’s place in the system
- How pushy is too pushy
- Writing with a partner
- Staying focused

Getting Paid:
- Everything you need to know from finding an agent to residuals.

Celebrate:
Eat cake and promise to keep in touch with people you’ll never see again.