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and by appointment

**ENGL 204/01**  
**Introduction to Screenwriting**  
**Spring 2011**  
**MWF 10 – 10:50 a.m.**  
**Palmer 211**

**Overview**

In this screenwriting workshop, you will read and analyze several mostly contemporary screenplays; you will review one current film; you will write a variety of scenes exercises, to be discussed in class; and you will workshop three one-act screenplays. At the end of the semester, you will revise and compile these three individual acts and turn in a final screenplay portfolio.

In our workshop critique and screenplay analysis, we will be most keenly concerned with narrative structure, how different screenwriters do the same essential task of conveying a narrative dramatically and visually within the confines of cinema. We will ask less the questions of what a film means and more the questions of how a film was written—the kinds of narrative decisions an author made and how they could be made differently and what the consequences might be.

We will also read a practical text to guide our efforts, as well as a handful of essays related to screenplay craft.

**Texts<sup>1</sup>**

*North by Northwest* by Ernest Lehman  
*Chinatown* by Robert Towne  
*State and Main* by David Mamet  
*When Harry Met Sally* by Nora Ephron  
*Goodfellas* by Martin Scorsese & Nicholas Pileggi  
*Pulp Fiction* by Quentin Tarantino  
*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* by Charlie Kaufman & Michel Gondry  
*Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* by Robert McKee

**Workshop**

This class is not really a lecture. No doubt I will do a lot of talking and you will do a lot of listening but the primary goal is to force you to write and to force the rest of the class to discuss that writing in sympathetic and constructive ways. Your task as a student is split between writing a screenplay (and the exercises) and discussing the work of your peers, which means your in-class discussion/comments and your written critiques are as important as your own writing. It will not only help your fellow students—giving them valuable feedback, giving them an actual audience, turning a private creation into a public act—it will sharpen your own critical skills. You will be able to view your own writing differently after critiquing your peers' work.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the texts are available both through the bookstore in old-fashioned hard copy and through our library's American Film Scripts Online database. You are free to obtain your scripts through either source.

What to say? You should look at your classmates' writing with an eye toward *how* it works, as a piece of drama, and you should evaluate how *well* it works according to some simple conventions of dramatic writing we will discuss.

### **The Three One-Act Screenplays**

Over the course of the semester you will write three one-act screenplays, or three miniature movies. Each one-act should be between 15 and 30 pages. Each screenplay *submitted for discussion* should be "complete," with a worked-out ending, i.e., a character reversal, even if it's a bad one. (Fixing bad endings is one of the things workshop is for.) At the end of the semester, you will hand in a portfolio of your original screenplays, your revised versions, and my initial workshop comments. The portfolio must be at least 60 and no more than 120 pages. In assessing the merit of the completed screenplay portfolio, I will pay special attention to the *revisions* you have made and how you have made use of the workshops.

Though the three acts you hand in over the course of the semester do not have to be dramatically contiguous—that is, sharing the same sets of characters, occurring in some chronological or thematic relationship, or extending the same mode of conflict—they certainly can be, if you prefer. (However, if you do make your acts dramatically contiguous, each draft must be its own separate act, with all the narrative ingredients that comprise a screenplay act; you cannot hand in a revision of a previous act. Each piece submitted for workshop must be its own distinct dramatic unit.) The resulting portfolio won't necessarily be a complete, seamless screenplay. But the goal is to put you through the necessary procedures of screenplay writing—in miniature—so that by the end of the class you should have the skills necessary to embark on a full-length, 90-120-page, three-act screenplay.

During workshop weeks, we will workshop roughly 4 scripts per class period. You will submit your screenplays to me via email attachment, and I will then compile all the screenplays into corresponding packets for the upcoming workshop days and email them back to the class. Each of you is then responsible for printing out that day's packet. Moreover, you will write *at least* a half-page of typed, single-spaced comments for each screenplay up for discussion. Please bring two copies of these typed-out comments, one for me and one for the author up for workshop. Put your name on these comments.

### **The Exercises**

You will write 4 exercises over the course of the semester, which I will grade. I will give you specific instructions. On your specified Exercise Day, you are to bring multiple copies of your typed exercise—one for me, one for yourself, and one for each additional speaking part in your exercise script (please include one copy for someone to read the narration). The class will read aloud from your exercise scripts and then we will discuss them.

### **The Review**

Though you aren't required to view the film versions of the screenplays we will read, you are strongly encouraged to do so, because reading screenplays is like reading blueprints; it's nice to see how the house turned out. We will watch clips from these movies in class to isolate certain techniques and moments for discussion.

However, in addition to all of this, you are required to see and review one contemporary movie that's either currently playing in the theater or has been released within the last few years. You must clear this movie with me by **Feb. 4**. Your job is to write a 2-3-page, double-spaced review of the movie, focusing on the craft issues we discuss in class. If you are at a loss for what movie to pick, I have a list of movies that I'd like to see reviewed.

### **Attendance**

You are allowed to miss three classes for any reason. For every missed class after three, your final grade for the course will be reduced by one third. I make no distinction between “excused” and “unexcused” absences. **If you miss more than 6 classes total, you will fail the course.** In addition, consistent tardiness will be counted as an absence.

### **Quizzes**

We’ll only have quizzes if class discussion lags. If these occur, they’ll be folded in with your participation grade.

### **Grade Breakdown**

4 exercises—20%

1 movie review—10%

Screenwriting Portfolio (three individual one-acts and their revisions)—60%

Participation (written comments, class discussion)—10%

Your individual pieces of writing will receive a letter grade as well as written and verbal feedback. How can you make a good grade? Hand in complete drafts and exercises on time; contribute constructive, energetic feedback on your peers’ work throughout the entire semester; contribute something to class discussion at each class meeting; engage in concentrated revisions of your screenplays, not simply fixing the spelling and changing characters’ names; and meet the other particular requirements for the various exercises along the way.

*The three screenplay one-acts and their three corresponding revisions constitute major assignments for this course; as such, if you do not hand in one of these major assignments, you will fail the entire class.*

### **Late Papers**

Each assignment is due on the day stipulated on the syllabus. Any late assignment will be reduced 1/3 of a letter grade for each day that it is delayed (A- to B+, etc.). Any assignment turned in 7 days past the original due date will receive a grade of F and can result in failure of the course itself. Also, if you don’t hand in a script in time for it to be properly workshopped, you will fail the class.

### **Plagiarism**

As per the Honor Code, all work you hand in during the semester must be entirely your own and produced exclusively for this class.

### **Disability Accommodation**

If you need any accommodations related to a disability, please schedule an appointment with Melissa Butler McCowen, Coordinator of Disability Services, 843-3994, mbutler@rhodes.edu.

*This syllabus and the following daily schedule are subject to change with adequate notice.*

## Tentative Daily Schedule

1/12	Introduction to class	4/4	<i>Pulp Fiction</i>
1/14	<i>Story</i> : Part 1 (all) and ch. 19 (in Part 4); read two beginnings	4/6	<i>Pulp Fiction</i> , cont.
		4/8	<i>Pulp Fiction</i> , cont.
1/17	MLK Day: No class	4/11	<i>Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</i>
1/19	<i>Story</i> : Part 2, ch. 2-3; read two beginnings	4/13	<i>Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</i> , cont.
1/21	Exercise #1 due	4/15	Wiggle Day; <b>Act 3 due</b>
1/24	<i>North by Northwest</i>	4/18	workshop
1/26	<i>North by Northwest</i> , cont.; <i>Story</i> : Part 2, ch. 4-6;	4/20	workshop
1/28	Exercise #2 due	4/22	Easter Break
1/31	<i>Chinatown</i>	4/25	workshop
2/2	<i>Chinatown</i> , cont.	4/27	workshop
2/4	AWP Conference: No class; <b>Movie review selection due</b> ; <i>Story</i> : Part 3, ch. 7-10	5/2	<b>Portfolio due by noon in my office, 302 Palmer</b>
2/7	<i>State and Main</i>		
2/9	<i>State and Main</i> , cont.		
2/11	Exercise #3 due		
2/14	<i>When Harry Met Sally</i>		
2/16	<i>When Harry Met Sally</i> , cont.		
2/18	Exercise #4 due		
2/21	Handouts; <b>Act 1 due</b>		
2/23	workshop		
2/25	workshop		
2/28	workshop		
3/2	workshop		
3/4	workshop; <i>Story</i> : Part 3, ch. 11-13		
3/7	<i>Goodfellas</i>		
3/9	<i>Goodfellas</i> , cont.		
3/11	<i>Story</i> catch up; handouts		
3/14	Spring Break		
3/16	Spring Break		
3/18	Spring Break		
3/21	<i>Story</i> : Part 4; <b>Act 2 due</b>		
3/23	workshop		
3/25	workshop		
3/28	workshop		
3/20	workshop		
4/1	workshop; <b>movie reviews due</b>		