

# film & television writing

**Course #:** MCOM 1000 ~ Online

**Instructor:** Adam Wadenius

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**Office Hours:** Email or online by appointment

**Semester:** Fall 2013

**Course Website:** <https://myetudes.org/portal>

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## course description

The aim of this course is to introduce you to the craft of screenwriting, and to develop the creative writing skills necessary to help you write an original screenplay or teleplay. We will be primarily concerned with narrative structure and character development as key components in storytelling, and we will analyze canonical film and television scripts as examples. The main activity of this class is writing, and after completing each module you will be asked to complete an assignment or workshop. The final project of this course is a polished 10-12 page treatment for a film or television series.

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## student learning outcomes

A collaborative learning environment is vital to the success of this course, and each of you will be required to respond to the work of your peers at various stages of the semester through written assignments and discussion sessions. It is expected that upon completion of this course, you will have a solid understanding of the following:

- ~ The basic structure of film & television scripts
- ~ The core concepts surrounding character development for film and television
- ~ An understanding of film and television as a business
- ~ The writing process for completing an original screenplay treatment or dramatic/comedic teleplay

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## course requirements

**Attendance:** Because this course meets via the internet, there are no specific meeting requirements or scheduled lecture times. It is expected, however, that you log into the course website at least once a week to complete any assignments, workshop with fellow classmates, complete course readings, and check for any updates to the materials. You may find that you will have to log into the site multiple times per week to download readings, coordinate workshops, and submit assignments. You are responsible for completing the modules, screenplay/teleplay readings, workshops and assignments every week. Please email me if, for some reason, you cannot complete a section during any given week. Emergencies will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

**Script & Module Readings:** It is imperative that you do all of the script assignments prior to reading the module for that week. The screenplay/teleplay readings are designed to aid in your understanding of the module material, and will also work to your benefit in terms of learning proper script format, and enhancing your appreciation for the great scripts that have been written throughout film and TV history.

**Assignment Guidelines:** There are a total of twelve writing and six workshop assignments for this course. All assignments are due on the designated due dates without exception. No late assignments will be accepted. All emergency situations leading to late assignments will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Good writing skills are a must in this course. I encourage you to take a proactive approach to your work, and I'm happy to field any questions or concerns that you may be having about any of the assignments.

**\*\* NOTE \*\* ~ Plagiarism and other issues concerning academic integrity will not be tolerated, and are grounds for an automatic failure in the course. Acknowledge all reading and research sources with appropriate footnotes and bibliography.** Keep all copies of your essays, exams, and notes until you have received a final grade for this class. ~

**Discussion, Messages & Chat:** You are encouraged to be actively involved in the class discussion/message boards and chat room. Be respectful of your fellow classmates when addressing and critiquing conflicting viewpoints, opening message topics and when chatting.

assessments

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Assignments (12)	50%
Workshops (6)	20%
10-12 pg. Treatment	30%

texts & materials

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1. Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting, by Syd Field. New York: Dell Publishing, 1994.
2. Selected essays available through the course website in the **'Modules'** section.
3. Selected screenplays available through the course website in the **'Resources'** section.

*Please remember that if you have any questions about the scripts, assignments, readings, or any of the course materials that I am readily available to help answer them. I can be reached through the email address above, or through the email and messaging system on the course website.*

schedule

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~ Writing for Film ~

### **Week #1 ~ (Aug. 19<sup>th</sup>) ~ The Screen Story**

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Reading: Screenplay, Chapter One - What is a Screenplay?  
Screenplay, Chapter Thirteen – Screenplay Form

Screenplay: *Chinatown* by Robert Towne

Assignment: Analyze the structure of *Chinatown* in terms of the screenplay paradigm. Write out a one-page summary of the film's set-up, confrontation, resolution and plot points I and II.

### **Week #2 ~ (Aug. 26<sup>th</sup>) ~ Developing the Subject**

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Reading: Screenplay, Chapter Two – The Subject  
Screenplay, Chapter Five – Story & Character

Screenplay: *Annie Hall* by Woody Allen & Marshall Brickman

Workshop: Write a brief introduction of yourself to the class, and post it in the **'Introductions'** topic located in the **'Discussions'** section. Read through and respond to at least two of your fellow classmates, as you will be collaborating with one another throughout the semester.

### **Week #3 ~ (Sep. 2<sup>nd</sup>) ~ No Class**

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**\*\* Labor Day Holiday \*\***

## Week #4 ~ (Sep. 9<sup>th</sup>) ~ Writing Characters

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Reading: Screenplay, Chapter Three – The Creation of Character  
Screenplay, Chapter Four – Building a Character

Screenplay: *Thelma & Louise* by Callie Khouri

Assignment: Write a 2-3 page character biography for a character of your creation. Start with the interior aspects of your character, and work your way on through the exterior aspects. Be sure to include details of your character's personal, private, and professional life. Articulate the dramatic need of your character, his/her point of view and attitude, and express any change or transformation that he/she will go through as your story progresses.

## Week #5 ~ (Sep. 16<sup>th</sup>) ~ The Hook and the Climax

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Reading: Screenplay, Chapter Six – Endings and Beginnings  
Screenplay, Chapter Seven – Setting Up the Story

Screenplay: *Collateral* by Stuart Beattie

Assignment: How does your story end, and how does it begin? Write a few paragraphs about the end of your story, detailing the resolution. Do the same for the beginning of your story, describing how it sets up the situation, establishes your main character, and starts the action moving forward.

Workshop: Post a copy of your character biography in the **'Character Bio'** topic located in the **'Discussions'** section. Read at least two ideas submitted by your fellow classmates, and write a 1-2 paragraph response for each. Offer any feedback you might have about the material: your overall thoughts, what you like and dislike, anything that may need polishing, any questions you may have, etc.

## Week #6 ~ (Sep. 23<sup>rd</sup>) ~ The Set-Up

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Reading: Screenplay, Chapter Eight – Two Incidents  
Screenplay, Chapter Nine – Plot Points

Screenplay: *American Beauty* by Alan Ball

Assignment: Write a one-page description of the set-up of your screenplay, identifying the key incident, the inciting incident, and plot points I & II. How does your inciting incident set the story in motion? What does your key incident reveal about the story? How do the plot points further the action while simultaneously spinning it in new direction?

## Week #7 ~ (Sep. 30<sup>th</sup>) ~ The Scene and the Sequence

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Reading: Screenplay, Chapter Ten – The Scene  
Screenplay, Chapter Eleven – The Sequence

Screenplay: *Magnolia* by Paul Thomas Anderson

Assignment: Brainstorm some scenes for your first act, and write out 14 sample slug lines. Write out the main beats that occur, and include a few descriptive sentences for each that address the following questions: What is the purpose of the scene? What happens? How does it move the story forward? What characters are in the scene, and what is their purpose? Structure your scenes into a rough outline.

Workshop: Post a copy of your set-up in the **'Set-up'** topic located in the **'Discussions'** section. Read at least two ideas submitted by your fellow classmates, and write a 1-2 paragraph response for each. Offer any feedback you might have about the material.

## Week #8 ~ (Oct. 7<sup>th</sup>) ~ Combining the Elements

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Reading: Screenplay, Chapter Twelve – Building the Story Line  
Screenplay, Chapter Fourteen – Writing the Screenplay

Screenplay: *The Shawshank Redemption* by Frank Darabont

Assignment: Sort through your sample slug lines and construct a 3-4 page sequence. Include a short paragraph that sets it up with a context. What is your narrative through-line? What is your sequence about? Where does this sequence fit into your screenplay? Remember to pay specific attention to how your sequence moves the story forward, and to what information is revealed about the character(s).

~ *Writing for Television* ~

## Week #9 ~ (Oct. 14<sup>th</sup>) ~ The Two and Four-Act Structure

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Reading: Module 8 – The Two and Four-Act Structure

Screenplay: *Lost* Episode 1, “Pilot” by J.J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof

Assignment: Watch four TV shows; two half-hour comedies and two hour-long dramas. Figure out the franchises (try not to choose obvious ones like *Law & Order*) and write them out. Identify the characters, who they have relationships with, and some of their character traits.

## Week #10 ~ (Oct. 21<sup>st</sup>) ~ Modern Sitcom Structure

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Reading: Module 9 – Modern Sitcom Structure

Screenplay: *Scrubs* Episode 1, “Pilot” by Bill Lawrence

Assignment: Brainstorm some A and B (and C & D if necessary) story ideas for a sitcom, and write-out 10-15 sample scene headings. Describe the main beats that occur in each scene, and structure them into a rough outline.

## Week #11 ~ (Oct. 28<sup>th</sup>) ~ Modern Dramatic Television

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Reading: Module 10 – Modern Dramatic Television

Screenplay: *The West Wing* Episode 1, “Pilot” by Aaron Sorkin

Assignment: Brainstorm a franchise for a dramatic television series (different from your sitcom idea). Write out a paragraph or so that explains your series, and then write a short character bio (a few sentences or so) for four main characters and two minor characters. Who are your protagonists, and who are your antagonists? Write out 3 or 4 character traits for each of the characters in your story. Pinpoint the conflict between these characters, and describe, in a few sentences, how this conflict works to heighten the drama.

Workshop: Post a copy of your outline in the ‘**Outline**’ topic located in the ‘**Discussions**’ section. Read at least two ideas submitted by your fellow classmates, and write a 1-2 paragraph response for each. Offer any feedback you might have about the material.

## Week #12 ~ (Nov. 4<sup>th</sup>) ~ The Television Character

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Reading: Module 11 – The Television Character

Screenplay: *The Office* - Episode 15, “Email Surveillance” by Jennifer Celotta

Assignment: Go through and answer each of the 20 key questions for two of the main characters, and two of the minor characters from your dramatic franchise idea.

Workshop: Post a copy of your franchise idea in the ‘**Franchise**’ topic located in the ‘**Discussions**’ section. Read at least two ideas submitted by your fellow classmates, and write a 1-2 paragraph response for each. Offer any feedback you might have about the material.

**Week #13 ~ (Nov. 11<sup>th</sup>) ~ No Class**

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**\*\* Veteran's Day Holiday \*\***

**Week #14 ~ (Nov. 18<sup>th</sup>) ~ Television Dialogue**

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Reading: Module 12 – Television Dialogue

Screenplay: *The Wire* - Episode 101, "The Target" by David Simon

Assignment: Choose whether you would like to write a treatment for a screenplay or teleplay, and write out a one-page synopsis of your idea, along with some brief character info.

*~ The Business of Film & Television ~*

**Week #15 ~ (Nov. 25<sup>th</sup>) ~ The Modern Film Industry**

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Reading: Screenplay, Chapter Seventeen – After It's Written

Screenplay: *Three Kings* by David O. Russell

Assignment: Turn in a rough draft of your treatment, along with a paragraph (or more) explaining where you feel you are at in the screenwriting process, any trouble you might be having, and some things you're still working towards developing. Don't be worried about having a polished effort here, as I'm expecting that these will be rough drafts that will need more work.

Workshop: Post a copy of your treatment in the 'Treatment' topic located in the 'Discussions' section. Read at least two ideas submitted by your fellow classmates, and write a 1-2 paragraph response for each. Offer any feedback you might have about the material.

**Week #16 ~ (Dec. 2<sup>nd</sup>) ~ The Modern TV Industry**

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Reading: Module 13 – The Modern TV Industry

Screenplay: *Studio 7 on the Sunset Strip*, "Pilot" by Aaron Sorkin

Assignment: Continue working on your treatment.

Workshop: Continue to brainstorm ideas with your fellow classmates in the forums and chat rooms.

**Week #17 ~ (Dec. 9<sup>th</sup>) ~ What to Write and How to Sell It**

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Reading: Module 15 – What to Write and How to Sell It

Screenplay: *Seinfeld*, Episode 43 "The Pitch", by Larry David

*Inglourious Basterds* by Quentin Tarantino

Assignment: Continue working on your treatment.

Workshop: Continue to brainstorm ideas with your fellow classmates in the forums and chat rooms.

**Week #18 ~ (Dec. 16<sup>th</sup>) ~ Finals Week**

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**\*\* 10-12 page Final Treatment Due on Dec. 20<sup>th</sup> \*\***