**COMM 4970/6970: Screenwriting**

**Course Description:** An introduction to writing for the screen. The focus is on full-length narrative film; however, we will devote significant class time to screening and discussing live-action shorts. Writing for television—particularly as a professional market—will also be discussed.

Lectures and/or readings will introduce the student to:

* the unique storytelling demands of writing for visual media
* formatting & style
* basic dramatic theory
* narrative structure
* characterization
* dialogue
* literary adaptation
* pragmatic matters of the marketplace

**Text:**  *The Screenwriter’s Bible* (sixth edition) by David Trottier

**Online Materials:** Complete syllabus, assignment guidelines, additional readings, and all other class materials are available exclusively on eCourseware.

**Assignment Notes:** We will be following Hollywood standard rules of formatting and style; therefore, all script-style assignments (#5 & #6, and all formatting exercises) **must** be produced with screenwriting software (that means no Microsoft Word, WordPerfect, Google Docs, etc.). If you do not already have screenwriting software, you **do not** have to buy one—there are professional-quality products available online for **free**. Most of them limit you or try to sell you a “pro” version, but the one I have found to be truly free and easy to use is Trelby: <http://www.trelby.org/>

All other, non-scripted assignments must be typewritten and double-spaced. Upper division college level writing skills are necessary to successfully complete assignments. Careful proofreading is expected.

**Assignments for Undergrad Feature Scripts Students Point Value (Out of 1,000)**

#1 Script Elements 100

#2 Character Bios & Synopsis (2-5 pp.) 150

#3 Outline Notes for Pitch (1-3 pp.) 50

#3A The Pitch 50

#4 Step Outline: (10+ pp.) 150

#5 First Pages for Workshop (10-15 pp.) 100

# #6 Master Scene Screenplay: (65+ pp.) 300

Exercises and Class Participation 100\*

**[Graduate Students: Confer with me after first class – Also, see note at end of syllabus for assignments]**

\*The Class Participation grade will be based on the completion of in-class exercises and homework assignments, and the quality of your participation in discussions, especially during the analysis of the three feature films screened in class. Naturally, absences will tend to lower your participation grade.

The +/- grading system will be employed in this class: A+ = 98-100; A = 90-97; B+ = 88-89; B = 83-87;

B- = 80-82; C+ = 78-79; C = 73-77; C- = 70-72; D+ = 68-69; D = 60-66 (Note: I do not give A-)

**Due Dates:** Assignment due dates are taken seriously in this class, just as writing deadlines are taken seriously for professional screenwriters. Any assignment submitted after the beginning of class the day it is due will suffer grade penalties. Pitch outlines, treatments and screenplays will be graded down an additional grade increment for each day (NOT each class) they are late. (Example of one increment: a B+ will be changed to a B.) Only extraordinary, **documented** excuses will be accepted for late work.

**Turning in Work:** Most assignments will be submitted via eCourseware, including the drafts of your script. No creative work will be submitted to plagiarism detection, and you will maintain all rights to your work under U.S. copyright law. Academic “non-creative” work, such as script analyses, may be subject to plagiarism detection. All work submitted to eCourseware is due by 11:59 pm of the day designated.

**Communication:** If you need to contact me for any reason, I strongly prefer that you do so via email. Additionally, I will frequently communicate with the class via mass email, so it is essential that you have an active U of M email account.

**Don’t Panic:** If you are concerned about your potential for successfully completing the course, I encourage you to make an appointment with me to discuss the matter prior to the March 20 Drop/Withdraw deadline.

**Changes to Syllabus:** The assignments listed above, and the following course schedule are subject to change as per instructor's notification, whether in class or via mass email.

**Class Schedule**

**Note: Readings should be completed by the date listed in schedule. In Book I, Trottier sometimes refers the reader to certain steps outlined in Book II, which I tried to highlight below. So, in effect, we will be reading Books I & II simultaneously. You do not have to actually perform these steps, but you should familiarize yourself with them for purposes of class discussion, as well as for whatever help they may offer you in your writing.**

Jan 20 **Introduction**

What are we writing and who are we writing it for?

Visual Storytelling and the Language of Film

Jan 27 **The “Major Motion Picture Paradigm”**

**Read:** Trottier, 3-35

**Due in class:** Exercise #1: Logline

Feb 3 **Paradigm Case Study**

**Screen:** *The Verdict*

**Read: T**rottier, 36-56 (and review Steps 1, 2 & 3 in Book II)

**Due:** Assignment #1, Script Elements

Feb10 **Creating Character**

**Screen:** *Breaking Away*

**Read:** Trottier, 57-92(and review Step 4 in Book II)

Feb 17 **Topic TBA**

**Read:** Trottier, 93-109

**Due:** Assignment #2, Character Bios and Synopsis

Feb 24 **Screenwriting Style and Format**

**Read:** 147-74; 185-94; 207-21 **– Skim** the rest

**Due in class:** Format Exercise: “Brophy’s Big Day”

Mar 3 **Student Pitches**

**Due:** Assignment #3, Pitch outline/notes

Mar 10 **Spring Break!**

Mar 17 **Thinking Small**

**Screen:** *Locke* (see script bank)

**Read:** Trottier, 130-43 (Steps 5, 6 & 7)

Mar 24 **Playing with the Form**

**Screen:** *Adaptation* (see script bank)

**Due:** Assignment #4, Step Outline

Mar 31 Conferences

Apr 7 Workshop – First pages

Apr 14 Workshop – First pages

Apr 21 **Case Study - TBA**

**Apr 23** **Due:** Assignment #6, Draft of Script

Apr 28 **Selling the Script**

**Read:** Trottier, Book V (Feel free to skim)

May 5 **Wrap-up**

**Reading Your Bible:** As noted above, the readings from *The Screenwriter’s Bible* are absolutely due on the dates indicated; however, the book is an easy, edifying read, and like that other well known moral guide, it behooves one to familiarize oneself with its lessons through frequent review

**Additional assignments and basis for grades for Graduate Students enrolled in 6970**

In addition to the assigned work described in the course syllabus, graduate students will be assigned one of the feature films we will be studying in class. You will write a five-to-seven-page paper on the film assigned to you. In this paper you will analyze the film in terms of the screenwriting principles that we will be discussing in class during the first half of the semester. You will need to rent a tape or DVD of the film prior to the class screening to prepare yourself to lead class analysis of the film the day it is screened. Your preparation and performance leading class discussion will be factored into the grade you receive on your written analysis of the film.

Your written paper will be due one week after your in-class presentation and will comprise 15% (150 pts.) of your final grade. Your other assignments are the same as the undergraduate assignments, but with the following values: Assignments #1 through # 5 are each worth 10% (100 pts.), and the major draft of your script is worth 25% (250 pts.). Class Participation, at 10% (100 pts), is especially important for graduate students.