

Course outline: Screenwriting

The MFA in Screenwriting is a specialisation within the broader **MFA in Film, Television and Games**.

The dual objective of the course is to help develop, nurture and challenge the individual voice of the writer, while preparing them for the rigours of the industry and the life of a professional writer.

The graduating screenwriter's portfolio will consist of at least the three of the following (or an agreed equivalent):

- a short script – either for a short fiction or animation graduation film, or an episode of a half hour sitcom, radio drama or stage play;
- a television series episode script and bible, either multi-stranded or stand alone;
- a original feature length film script.

Year One

The first year of the course establishes basic storytelling and introduces writers to a range of writing situations: short fiction films, short animations, short stage plays, original formats for TV series and Games. Also, to prepare the ground for developing feature film subjects, different forms are explored: realism, non-naturalism, non-linear narrative and fiction derived from fact. The groundwork is set for developing a feature screenplay.

The first year contains the following six assessed modules:

- Module 1 – Telling the Story in Pictures;
- Module 2 – First Year Film;
- Module 3 – Movie in a Month;
- Module 4 – First Year Plays;
- Module 5 – TV 1 – Writing a Pilot Episode;
- Module 6 – Animation Graduation Film.

Module 1: Telling the Story in Pictures

This module includes a series of workshops and group sessions that explore all the different aspects of writing on offer throughout the course. This will include form and process - treatments, outlines, bibles, scripts - methods of working, the 'business' of screenwriting, visual storytelling, research-based writing, writing outside the realist tradition, examining different genres, adaptation, an introduction to writing for radio and for theatre and an introduction to Games. There will also be an introduction to other disciplines (including Cinematography, Sound and Editing) and their relationship with the screenwriting process.

Throughout the term, writers will originate a variety of contrasting feature storylines, examine them as a practical source of story construction, and explore them in terms of Visual Storytelling. Particular emphasis will be on developing further non-verbal means of storytelling. Development of character, story, backstory, structure, style, genre, theme and subtext will be covered.

At least 6 treatments or outlines for feature films (or ideas for TV shows) will be written during this period. The module will be taken in a group with regular writing exercises and regular group feedback.

Module 2: First Year Film – Development

The screenwriters will come up with three short original treatments of potential films from which 10 teams of screenwriter, director and producer will be formed. Over a number of weeks, directors and producers will work with screenwriters as the writer develops an expanded treatment then various drafts of a script based on one of their three original ideas. Directors and producers will be guided on how to help the writer move the script from an idea, towards greater clarity and depth with each draft. The script will be locked before the Summer break.

As the production develops there will be ongoing meetings with Cinematography, Production Design and Sound Design. The needs of the script will be discussed to determine whether the film will be shot on location or studio.

While the Writers may not always be directly involved in production in Term 3, they should be available to revise their scripts in response to budget and casting decisions and resolve any script problems in consultation with the Producer and Director. In post-production, they should also be available to provide any additional feedback during the edit.

Module 3: Movie in a Month (MIAM)

Few writers joining the course will have already written a full-length screenplay. This module is designed to help overcome the justifiable apprehension that goes with getting over this first hurdle. Using one of the 5 or 6 feature treatments generated in Term 1, with the guidance of an individual tutor/mentor, each writer will have 4 weeks to complete a 1st draft of a feature script, then subsequent weeks to do a 2nd draft and a polish.

Module 4: First Year Play

Writing for the stage is a new experience to most writers, but a hugely valuable, challenging and enjoyable one. The initial development stage of the module in Term 2 is led by experienced theatre dramaturg, with each writer developing a 10-minute play for two actors, and completing various drafts across the summer break.

This module continues in Term 3 with visiting theatre directors (such as Adam Penford, Kirsty Patrick Ward, Hettie Macdonald, Michael Buffong, Andy McNamee, Blanche McIntyre and Vicky Jones), and with a company of professional actors, as the 10-minute plays developed in the previous term and across the summer break are presented at a London Theatre (Soho Theatre or similar New Writing Venue). This provides writers with the opportunity to rehearse the script with actors and a professional theatre director and present the play to an invited audience at the theatre.

The process explores the differences between dramatising a story for the stage and the screen and opens writers up to the professional possibilities of the medium, which is closely watched by the Film and TV Industry as a source of new writing and new voices. The performances of the plays are open to an invited audience of NFTS friends, family & industry.

Module 5: TV 1 – Writing a Pilot Episode

Towards the end of Year 1, there will be an introduction to this exercise and the chance for the Screenwriters to start developing ideas (and/or bringing existing ones from the TV Ideas Workshop in Term 2) that they will work on over the Christmas break and present as a pitch at the beginning of Year 2.

This module then continues in Year 2 where the Screenwriters will go on to write a Pilot script for a series they have developed. The first few weeks will cover storylines and finish with a scene by scene outline. The next stage will take the project to 1st draft script. The Screenwriters will be assigned individual tutors who will support them through the module. There will be a final review of all the pilots with all writers and tutors.

Module 6: Animation Graduation Film

This module is led by the Animation department, and all Screenwriters are available and encouraged to write, co-write or script edit an Animation Graduation Film. This involves collaboration with Directing Animation students on the scripting and development of their ideas alongside the Producing students, to develop a short animation idea through outlines, scripts, mood and storyboards which fully serve the animator's vision and needs. Development commences at the end of Year 1 and continues in Year 2, overseen in weekly tutorials with senior tutors from Screenwriting, Animation and Producing. Production commences in Year 2.

Other Course Content

Foundation Course

There is a two week Foundation Course immediately before the beginning of the course in which the writers will have the chance to get to know each other and their tutors, and get an introduction to their department and the many areas of writing that they'll cover later in the course. There will also be a Joint Narrative Workshop with the Fiction Directors and Producers across 3 or 4 days which will emphasise the importance of collaboration on the course and in the professional world post-graduation.

Springboard

A cross-school and interdisciplinary introduction to film and television, looking at cinematic language and televisual language through the prism of storytelling. It investigates how the main crafts of cinema and television, screenwriting, cinematography, visualisation, editing, sound and music relate to the way filmmaking puts across narrative ideas.

Animation – From Ideas to Animatics

This workshop is joint across Directing Animation, Screenwriting and Editing, with students working together to find a new and original story or idea that can be told through animation. Animation students then articulate the idea through a mission statement, and produce dramatic and emotional storyboards and animatics. There is then a final screening and review for all participating departments.

Writing a Short Film

Starting with ideas development, analysis of form and structure, character and theme, through outline and development to finished short film script.

TV – Bible in a Week

Looking at the various forms of developing, writing, presenting and pitching ideas for TV Series – pitches, decks, bibles, mini-bibles, etc. – and producing a mini-bible from a new original series idea.

TV Ideas

A workshop exploring the landscape and history of TV drama series, and the chance for each writer to come up with ideas that they may develop further in the two other TV modules later in the course.

Animation – Character Film

This is a joint workshop across Screenwriting, Directing Animation, Editing and Sound Design

to write and produce an animated film with two well developed and dynamic characters. Using personality traits as the starting point, Animation students will create rounded characters that think and can express real emotions. Screenwriting students will work with the Animation students to write dialogue for the film, direct and record actors delivering this. There will be a final screening and review with all participating departments.

Year Two

The second year of the course is devoted to a full-length screenplay, two one-hour TV series Pilot Scripts and a TV Bible, plus any collaborations on short fiction or animation graduation films or on a graduation project with the Games Department. At the time of graduation, the screenwriters' work will be showcased in addition to the Graduation Screenings with their own Screenwriters' Graduation Showcase.

The course ends with extensive introductions to the industry (top agents, producers and production companies, broadcasters, commissioners, streamers, etc.) with preparation on the practicalities and legalities of working. In this process, writers learn to pitch the projects in their portfolio and present their own stories to the industry.

The second year contains the following three assessed modules:

- Module 7 – IP for High-End TV;
- Module 8 – Feature Film Development & Writing;
- Module 9 – TV – TV Pilot and Bible.

Module 7: IP for High-End TV

IP for High End TV is launched during Year 1 with the teaching taking place during the first term of Year 2. Screenwriters will collaborate with Producers on an outline for a high-end TV series or single TV drama, grounded in a piece of intellectual property sourced by the Producers. This process will culminate in an informal presentation to a panel of industry professionals. This module will foster opportunities for Screenwriters to work collaboratively on developing IP with Producing students, which is increasingly relevant in today's market and reflects industry best practice.

Module 8: Feature Film Development & Writing

Following on from *Movie in a Month* in Year 1, in a series of sessions across Term 1, this module explores a range of potential styles, subject matter, form and content in feature film writing to help the screenwriters develop their ideas for their grad feature script.

Post the Cornwall Writers' Retreat, each Writer will then be assigned an individual tutor with whom a schedule will be agreed to deliver a 1st, 2nd and hopefully 3rd draft script ready for the MFA portfolio. Suitable deadlines for each Writer will be established, and part of final assessment will be the student's ability to meet agreed deadlines with their re-writes and drafts.

Module 9: TV – TV Pilot & Bible

In this final TV module, the Screenwriting students will go on to write a 2nd Pilot script and a TV Bible for the subsequent series, applying the lessons they have learned throughout their previous 3 TV modules, to a substantial piece of work for both their MFA portfolio and the industry.

Screenwriting Dissertation

During the year the students also complete their Dissertation module (the outline of which dissertation is delivered in Year 1).

As part of the work necessary to qualify for an MFA, each student is required to produce an independent written dissertation or video essay. This runs from the start of the 1st Year to April of the 2nd Year. Following discussions with the Screenwriting Department Dissertation Tutor, and Screen Arts tutors in the first half of the 1st year, students deliver 500-word outline proposal by June of the 1st year; 2000-word detailed proposal and structure by November of 1st Year (students may not progress into 2nd year if they fail to deliver this). Full draft dissertation of 7,000-10,000 words (including sources and bibliography) must be delivered before Easter break of 2nd Year and following discussion with tutors, final version of dissertation before Summer break of the 2nd Year.

An alternative option of a twenty minute video essay is also available to MFA students.

Other Course Content

Digi Fiction Film

This is a potential collaborative exercise with Directing Fiction to make a 15-minute short scripted fiction film shot on digital format.

Fiction Graduation Film

Writers may be involved in a Graduation Fiction film, as a result of developing an informal collaboration with Fiction Directors and go on to write an original short graduation film or help a Director with their script. The script is developed in collaboration with a Producer and Director to an agreed length, budget and time frame, tutored by all three departments. Writers then join the production team, revising the script in response to budget and casting decisions. During the shoot, Writers are expected to resolve any script problems in consultation with the Producer and Director. In post-production, Writers should view each cut and provide any additional material required.

Writers' Retreat

This one-week residential Writers' Retreat takes place in Cornwall and provides Screenwriting students with a chance to take stock of their development thus far as the course starts to become more industry facing in the final two terms. They'll also have the chance to mix with their peers and tutors away from the day-to-day pressures of the NFTS, and to complete their treatments for their Graduation Feature Scripts in a series of informal tutorials. They will then be assigned an individual tutor who will guide and support them till the completion of their final draft.

Biographies & Tasters

These weekly workshops provide a crucial part of students' industry preparation. All Screenwriting students produce a short biography / CV and select 20 pages (or 2 x 10 pages) as a script sample (taster) for all the agents, producers, broadcasters and commissioners, etc, that they will encounter in their 'Meet the Industry' sessions. The selection will be made in consultation with the Head of Department and Tutors.

Meet the Industry

These workshop sessions are the final part of the course and will feed in directly to the Screenwriting students' readiness to take on a professional life, concluding with a series of days spread over 3 weeks in London meeting the top Literary Agents, Producers, Production Companies, Broadcasters, Commissioning Editors and Streamers.

Full preparation and briefing will be given beforehand with various tutors and visiting

professionals, including - practical work on how to present yourself and your projects both verbally and in pitch documents, and on how the formal side of professional relationships and legalities work.

Students will need to acquaint themselves with the work of the people they are meeting, and prepare themselves in an appropriate professional manner for each meeting. Students' self-penned biographical introductions and work samples will be assembled by the students in collaboration with Lead Tutors and the Head of Department and also sent in advance.

Prep for Graduation Showcase

The work of the graduating Writers will be showcased in a performance with actors, directed by two visiting directors. This will take place in the same period as the graduation screenings, after the end of the course, in order to put spotlight on writing and further introduce the Writers to the industry. The invited audience will include Producers, Literary Agents, Directors and Commissioning Editors, etc. The consideration of how best to maximise this opportunity will be discussed and agreed with the Head of Department.

Development Boards & Review Sessions

These two forums bring together tutors and students from all specialisations to prepare for and review each Production. The Development Boards monitor the development and interpretation of the script and manage the practicalities of production. Screenwriting students must respond to demands from many different departments and learn to work as a member of a team. The Review Sessions look at the finished film and reflect on the whole production process from script to final cut.

Screenwriting students are expected to give a coherent account of their intentions and assess the strengths and weakness of the film.