

Course outline: Screenwriting

The MA in Screenwriting is a specialisation within the broader **MA in Film and Television**.

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

- a short script – either for a short fiction or animation graduation film, or an episode of a half hour soap, sitcom, radio drama or stage play
- a television series episode script, either multi-stranded or standalone
- a feature length script for film or television, either original or adaptation

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 second year is devoted to the full-length screenplay, the hour long television script, plus any collaboration on short fiction or animation graduation films or on a graduation project with the Games Department. At the time of graduation, the writers' work is also showcased separately to the screenings.

The course ends with extensive introductions to the industry with preparation on the practicalities and legalities of working. In this process, writers learn to pitch the projects in their portfolio.

Year One

Overview of Screenwriting Curriculum – First Year

Assessed Modules and more informal Workshops will cover these issues:

Term 1

- the screenwriter's screen language – *Telling the Story in Pictures* - a general introduction to all the different kinds of writing that will be covered in the course – features, TV, radio, theatre, animation, games, etc. – writing treatments, form and structure, feature film early development, different genres, adaptation, research-based factual writing, etc.

- the Screenplay as a blueprint for production
- developing ideas with directors and producers
- Animation 1 exercise with animation directors
- Beginning, Middle and End exercise with Documentary Directors

Term 2

- developing ideas with Fiction Directors for First Year Films
- 'Beyond Time' - writing a short script for fiction directors to shoot
- writing for radio workshop and collaboration with sound
- writing an original format for TV series
- theatre – developing a short play and practising the essential difference between writing for stage and screen
- further development of feature film projects

Term 3

- courtroom exercise in collaboration with documentary directors – visiting a courtroom as the inspiration for a treatment for a film or TV show
- completing the short play which will then be rehearsed with a professional theatre director and performed at the Soho Theatre (or similar venue) with a small cast of professional actors
- developing an original feature project to treatment stage or beyond
- 'Movie in a Month' - writing a full length feature film script
- originating and developing a dramatic monologue for TV which reveals a story
- games design – multi departmental collaboration on a short sequence
- grad animation development

Overview of first year collaborations:

- with Producers on TV Formats
- with Directors of Animation on animation storyboards and narratives
- with Directors of Fiction and Producers on developing short film ideas/scripts for the First Year Film, where applicable, plus 'Visual Narrative' and 'Beyond Time' workshops
- with Directors and Producers of TV Entertainment on filmed monologues
- with Directors of Documentary on the treatment of factual subject matter
- with Games Designers on interactive narrative story elements for Games

Term 1

“Springboard” Cross Specialisation Introductory Workshop

- an introduction to teach of the departments and disciplines represented in the school and to the moving image, looking at cinematic and televisual language through the prism of storytelling
- investigates how the main crafts of cinema and television, screenwriting, cinematography, visualisation, editing, sound and music each relate to the way filmmaking puts across narrative ideas.

Telling the Story in Pictures

A series of workshops and group sessions that explore all the different aspects of writing that are on offer throughout the course. This will include form and process - treatments, outlines, 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, and Silent Movie, a practical shooting exercise with Documentary.

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.

Animation Exercise 1 with Animation Directors Workshop

This exercise is a short collaboration with directors of Animation on character and story, for animators to take to animatic.

Visual Narrative Workshop

Short workshop with Fiction Directors with directing tutor Ian Sellar.

Away Days Workshop (duration - 4 days)

A playful residential workshop to develop collaborative and storytelling skills, jointly with producing and Fiction directing departments. Writers will get know better fellow students who may become collaborators and start finding a common language for creative collaboration.

Term 2

Development of the First Year Film Module

Writers who have found collaborative relations with fiction directors and producers may go on to develop with them a script for the First Year Film, which shoots in the autumn. The story development process will start after the AWAY DAYS. Writers who do not do this may advance with their feature ideas with dedicated tutoring.

Timespan: Easter to autumn and according to development schedule. Screenwriting Tutor is currently film and TV writers Peter Berry or Tammy Riley-Smith. Individual writers may be working with directors and producers to develop a short screenplay suitable for production in the autumn. The Aim is to achieve a successful collaboration on a script suitable for the parameters of time and budget, to the highest creative standards.

Beyond Time Workshop

Writing a short 5-minute script for the Fiction Directors to shoot with the cinematographers and other departments.

Writing for Radio

An intensive workshop with radio producer and writer Jeremy Mortimer that explores the many exciting possibilities of writing professionally for radio. A joint workshop in collaboration with the Sound, Editing and Composing Departments with recording of actors and production of soundscapes and music.

Original TV Series Format Workshop

Led by practising television drama writers Clive Bradley, Holly Phillips, producer Rachel Wardlow and ex drama editor-commissioner, Karin Bamborough, and other visiting speakers, including a current TV Drama Commissioner. Cross-specialisation module with Producers to explore the landscape of TV drama series, the identity and commissioning preferences of individual channels, and to generate a new proposal with a clear audience and end user channel in mind. It is consisting of formal seminars together with individual work on developing original projects at format stage, in producer/writer teams, closely tutored. The final product of a TV mini Bible is delivered in writing and verbal pitches at (e.g.) the BBC or C4. The document will include a section on 360-degree marketing, prepared by the producing students, tutored by current producer of 360-degree content.

Soho Theatre Plays Module

Writing for the stage is a new experience to most writers, but a hugely valuable, challenging and enjoyable one. Led by an experienced theatre dramaturg (e.g. Tom Lyons from the National Theatre) each writer will develop a 10-minute play for two actors, completing various drafts across the summer break.

Animation Exercise 2 with Animation Directors and Editors Workshop

Developing character and story with the directors of Animation for a short animatic.

Term 3

Courtroom Workshop

A joint exercise with the Documentary Directors who have to who, over a number of visits to a courtroom, have to come up with a pitch for a documentary, while the writers have to write a treatment for a feature film or TV show.

Soho Theatre Plays Module (continued)

With visiting theatre directors such as Adam Penford, Kirsty Patrick Ward, Hettie Macdonald, Michael Buffong, Andy McNamee and Vicky Jones, and with a small company of professional actors, the 10 minute plays developed in the previous term and across the summer break are presented at London's Soho Theatre (or similar New Writing Venue). This workshop 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 and will be produced on the main stage at the Soho Theatre.

MIAM – Movie in a Month

Few writers joining the course will have already written a full-length screenplay. So MIAM 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 the 1st Term, each writer will have 4 weeks to complete a 1st draft of a feature script.

TV Monologues Module

In collaboration with the Television Entertainment department, writers write a short dramatic or comic monologue, to a clear brief, which is filmed by the Television Entertainment students in the TV Studio. The subject matter is a free choice of the writers, and affords a further opportunity to writing produced.

Early Feature Development Module

Led by screenwriter and HoD Brian Ward & Producer, Development Executive and Script Editor Angeli Macfarlane, an expansion of the opening module of the year.

An introduction to the range of potential styles and subject matter, to open up understanding of the palette of form and content possible in feature film writing. Each part of the module will include a

practical writing exercise and all work will be discussed in the group. This is also intended to act as a seedbed for film ideas and approaches. Aspects explored with practical writing exercises are: Dream and Reality; Fact-based stories; Alternative narrative structures.

The overall aim is developing the writer's story to outline or treatment stage. This will be tutored individually as well as in groups with a range of tutors, ideally suitable to each writer.

By the end of the first year, writers should have at least a fully developed feature film treatment, or first draft screenplay dependent on the spread of collaborations with other departments over the year.

Multi-track Options

Towards the end of the Third term a number of different options will be available which will include:

Prep for Writing for Animation Graduation Film Workshop

Two weeks as individual days during the term.

In conjunction with Animation and Producing department, working towards potential collaboration teams for the animation graduation films in the 2nd Year.

Moments of Consequence & Synthespians workshop with Games Department

Led by the Games design department these modules explore the possibilities for character and story in the context of short moments in an interactive Game. Also participating are producers, designers and sound designers.

Year Two

In the second year of the Screenwriting MA, the curriculum is more tailor-made for the individual writers, from within the range of activities in the NFTS curriculum, with the aim of compiling an individual and varied graduation portfolio.

Overview of Screenwriting Second Year Curriculum

- Development and Completion of TV pilot script
- Development and Completion of feature script
- Potential collaboration with Animation or Fiction directors on graduation films
- Potential collaboration with Fiction directors on digi-fiction or graduation films
- Potential collaboration with Games on graduation project
- Continuation of Sitcom module
- Potential second feature script
- Potential development of sitcom script/horror treatment/or other area of special interest
- Development and Completion of Dissertation

Term 1

Development Animation Graduation Film Module (duration - over 8-week period)

Led by the Animation department, this is for those writers who are involved in a graduation animation film; collaboration with Animation directors on the scripting and development of their ideas and with the producers; to develop a short animation idea through outlines and scripts which fully serve the animation director's vision and needs

TV Series Pilot Writing Module

Led by writers Clive Bradley, Holly Phillips and producer Rachel Wardlow. Building on the work done in the joint workshop with producers, the writers will go on to write a Pilot script for this or another series they have developed. This first 5 weeks will cover storylines and finish with a scene by scene outline. The next stage will take the project to first draft script.

Dissertation

Continuing work on dissertation.

Development of Feature Script Module (throughout the term)

This is for those who are going straight on to feature script writing and not involved in Animation; building on the Feature development workshop. It can be possible to write at least a first draft feature script; to deliver a first draft by the Easter break

Adaptation Workshop

Led by a practising screenwriter the workshop will include a practical element. Aims will include the understanding the writing processes and pitfalls of adaptation.

Digi-fiction

Potential involvement as writer or co-writer on Fiction directors 2nd film – Digi-fiction.

Term 2

Development Short Fiction Graduation Film Module (throughout the term)

This is for those writers who are involved in a graduation fiction short film, as a result of developing an informal collaboration with fiction directors. Writing an original short graduation film or helping a director with their script may become for some writers one option during the second year of the course. The script is developed in collaboration with a producer and director to an agreed length, budget and time frame, tutored by a professional writer, and is discussed and approved at a series of Development Boards by tutors. 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 may view each cut and provide any additional material required.

Development of Feature Script Module (ongoing throughout the year)

As in the spring term, this is a continuing process, with first, second and third draft delivery dates as appropriate for each writer, and regular individual tutorials. Writers who are heavily involved with Animation in the first term should aim this term to deliver their first draft screenplay before the summer break, if they did not do this before the end of the First Year. Writers who completed their first draft screenplays at Easter should aim to complete a second draft by the summer break. They may then be in a position to start a second feature screenplay in the summer. 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.

Dissertation Completion

During the year across as many tutorials as the writer may require, the drafting of the dissertation should move steadily forward. It is recommended to complete a first draft by Easter, in order to benefit fully from tutor feedback before final completion. The final dissertation **MUST** be completed before the Summer break.

Term 3

'Meet the Industry' - Preparation for Industry meetings and graduation

Tutors: HoD Brian Ward, all tutors and many guest speakers and workshops.

Overview: This is the final part of the course and will feed in directly to the writer's readiness to take on a professional life and will conclude with a series of days spread over 3 weeks in London meeting Literary Agents, Producers, Production Companies, Broadcasters and Commissioning Editors.

Full preparation and briefing will be given beforehand with various tutors and visiting professionals, including: practical work on how to present oneself and one's 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 the Head of Department and also sent in advance.

Prep for Graduation Showcase Read-throughs

The work of the graduating writers will be showcased in a rehearsed reading/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, (usually late February or early March) 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. The consideration of how best to maximise this opportunity will be discussed and agreed with the Head of Department.

Running Curriculum Elements - throughout both year groups

- regular individual meetings with Head of Department for module choices, organisation of workload, support with meeting of delivery deadlines, relationships with the industry
- analysing of feature and television drama script with leading script analysts and others
- screening and analysis of films in group sessions with visiting tutors analysing them from the point of view of a screenwriter
- script tutorials with a range of tutors
- first year outings to theatre to see new writing experience of their work being read by actors, within different modules
- Masterclasses with leading writers

The year one and year two modules described may be subject to alteration, re-planning, or be removed due to changes in availability of visiting tutors, or other circumstances beyond our control.

In addition to the written curriculum, students in the Screenwriting Department are open to many other sources of learning:

Development Boards and 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.