

Writing the Killer Crime Story Suggested Course Outline

Course Description: Learn how to create authentic and dramatic crime stories. Become an amateur CSI by delving into the study of forensic science.

Course goals and objective: Students will:

- learn the fundamentals of crime dramas and apply them to their own crime story.
- study film and television crime stories.
- develop a crime story from logline to script.
- become familiar with key concepts of forensic science and death investigation.
- practice working in writing groups much like a TV writer's room.

Required Reading:

Dornbush, Jennifer, *Forensic Speak: How to Write Realistic Crime Dramas*. Michael Wiese Productions. ISBN: 1615931317, February 1, 2013.

Seger, Linda, *Making a Good Script Great 3rd Ed.*, Writers Digest Books, ISBN 1935247018, February, 2010.

Suggested Reading:

Douglas, Pamela, *Writing the TV Series*, 3rd Edition. Michael Wiese Productions. ISBN: 1615930582, October 1, 2011.

Christopher Riley, *The Hollywood Standard 2nd Ed.*, Michael Wiese Productions, ISBN 1932907637, August 1, 2009

Week 1 - Why CSI gained 70 million viewers worldwide?

- What is a crime story?
- Why do we love them? Why are they here to stay?
- The top 10 crime story types on TV today and which one is right of you.

In class workshop: Screen one of the following: *CSI*, *Dexter*, *Pushing Daisies*, or *Monk*

Assignment: Write an essay explaining why you love crime genre and want to write in this genre. In this essay list your top 10 all-time most-loved crime films and TV shows. What genres do they fall under and do you see a pattern? Explain which of the 10 crime genres you feel most attracted to and why.

Week 2 – Anatomy of a Crime Story

- Basic structure of a procedural
- Three points of proof you need to build a captivating crime
- Key characters you need in every crime show
- How to develop compelling B, C, and D stories
- Secret story tropes the professionals use

In class workshop: Watch *Rear Window* (or another Hitchcock film) and discuss structure, points of proof, key characters, story tropes, and sub-plots.

Assignment: Take one of the films or shows you listed as your top 10 and write a short essay analyzing the structure, points of proof, five key characters, tropes used, and sub-plots.

Week 3 – Modeling the Masters

- How to breaking down a TV crime story in acts and beats
- How to creating a show summary
- How to create character descriptions

In class workshop: Screen the pilot episode of *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, “One” and break it down into story type, points of proof, acts, beats, character descriptions and show summary.

Assignment: Students view crime show/film of professor’s choice and break it down according to acts and beat descriptions.

Week 4 - Becoming your own CSI

- Read Chapter 1 of Forensic Speak
- Finding ideas for a great story
- Marrying ideas for a great story
- Dos and Don’ts of Using real life examples
- Getting life or book rights

In class workshop: Gather into groups. Have each student discuss three terms or ideas they learned from this chapter that interested them or surprised them. Next, have each person select one of these terms and how they would incorporate them into their own crime story in a fresh way.

Assignment: Select an episode from *CSI* or *NCSI* or other investigative show. As you watch, make a running list of the types of evidence recovered from the crime. Biological, circumstantial, direct, impression, physical, trace. As you watch take notes on how investigators recover the evidence. Has it been collected and stored properly? What kind of protective gear are investigators wearing at the scene? Does the evidence follow a proper chain of custody? What kind of processing do they do with the evidence? Was the body found prone or supine? Was there an identifiable modus operandi or signature the criminal used? How many items from the CSI’s toolkit can you identify in this film or show? Based on what you learned in this chapter, how would you do things differently to apply real life forensics?

Week 5 – Incorporating Death Investigation

- Read Chapter 2 of Forensic Speak
- Discuss last week’s assignment.
- How to move from idea to logline.
- What makes for a memorable logline?
- What is a commercial story?
- Where does your story belong?

In class workshop:

Watch an episode from one of the following coroner procedurals: *Body of Proof*, *Crossing Jordan*, *Quincy M.E.* As you view, make a running tally of how many terms from Chapter 2 come into play in the show. What can you identify in the morgue? Who is there? What tools of the trade are they using? How did the victim die?

Assignment: Write 10 loglines for your own crime story.

Week 6 – A Writer’s Look Inside A Toxicology Lab

- Read Chapter 3 of Forensic Speak
- What is forensic toxicology?
- How to recover drugs properly.
- When it's okay to search for drugs.
- How to incorporate drugs in your stories. Case studies: *Breaking Bad* & *Weeds*
- Developing characters and writing character descriptions

In class workshop:

Divide students into groups to read their loglines to each other. Have other students provide feedback and select their favorite best loglines from each other. Discuss the loglines and what makes them work or fall flat? Select one logline from each student in the group and workshop it to make it stronger.

Assignments: 1. Select your five key characters and write a character description for each.
2. Do a little research on street drugs. www.erowid.com is an excellent on-line resource. Pick one and describe where it comes from, how it has been used, and how it's recognized in the body. Using this information, create a one page synopsis for one of your characters who uses this drug in a crime-related scenario. Include information on how the criminal gets access to the drug, how he gets access to his victim, and what is his motive or intent in committing the crime.

Week 7 – The Underrated Importance of the fingerprint

- Read Chapter 4 of Forensic Speak
- How to read a fingerprint
- The importance of ACE-V in building your case
- Creating the crime scenario for your story

In class workshop:

Watch a couple of scenes from your favorite crime-related film or TV show. As you watch, make a list of all the places where the criminal/villain could have left her fingerprints or palm prints. Are these full or partial prints? What kind of prints might they be? Latent, patent, plastic?

Assignments: 1. Create crime scenario for your story. Include the three points of proof. Write a one page narrative describing the crime, the motives, the weapons, the location. Focus only on the actual crime and its player. Describe how and why it occurred.

2. Take the story you are working on. Place yourself in the scene or moment when the crime occurred. Walk yourself around this scene, this setting, and make a list of all the potential places your criminal/villain could have left fingerprints. Now select three to five of these places and circle them on your list. These are places where your investigator protagonist will eventually find prints. Decide if you want them to be discovered all at once or if you want to leave one or two for discovery later. Are they full or partial prints? What kind of prints are they — latent, patent, or plastic?

Week 8 – Using DNA evidence appropriately

- Read Chapter 5 of Forensic Speak
- Building clues, evidence, and suspense into your story.
- How to create a beat sheet

In class workshop:

In small groups workshop last week's crime scenario assignment. Try to iron out all the holes so your crime is airtight. Resist the urge to change each other's stories, just try to make them stronger.

Assignment: 1. Create a beat sheet of your story from beginning to end. It's okay if you don't have the whole mystery figured out. Do your best to lay out the clues and evidence. Make

2. Take the story you are working on. Place yourself in the scene or moment when the crime occurred. Walk yourself around this scene, this setting, and make a list of all the potential places your criminal/villain could have left DNA. Now, select three to five of these places and circle them on your list. These are places where your investigator protagonist will eventually find DNA. Decide if you want them to be discovered all at once or if you want to leave one or two for discovery later.

Week 9 – The Glamour of the Spatter

- Read Chapter 6 of Forensic Speak
- Going to draft.
- How to write energy-charged scenes.
- Finding character voices.

In class workshop: Learn how blood spatters. Create your own blood spatter experiment in pairs. Use the exercise found here: <http://www.chymist.com/BLOODSTAIN%20PATTERNS.pdf>
Assignment: Write the opening and closing scene of your crime story.

Week 10 - Lawyers, Guns & Money – Part I

- Read Chapter 7 of Forensic Speak
- Guest lecturer – gun expert
- How guns work
- What kinds of guns are right for your crime story?
- How to treat guns and weapons as evidence.

In class workshop: In small groups, read the opening and closing scenes of each writer's stories. What is working well? What do you like about them? Does the opening introduce enough suspense and intrigue about the characters and crime that you want to read more? Does the ending feel satisfying and complete?

Assignments: Write the first draft of crime story.

Week 11 – Lawyers, Guns & Money - Part II

- Read Chapter 8 of Forensic Speak
- Guest lecturer: Trial attorney or judge

In class workshop: Visit a courtroom trial. Have students write down observations or descriptions of the “characters” in the room. Share them during the next class session or workshop.

Assignment: Keep writing the first draft of crime story.

Week 12 – Putting it all Together

- Learning to use the internet better.
- Professional journals, trades, and organizations.
- Historical research.
- Conducting research interviews.
- Keeping your research organized and accessible.
- Plagiarism in fiction writing.
- Tips for getting beyond writer's block.
- How to give good story notes to other writers.

In class workshop: Have students join in small groups to work through any questions, story problems, or stuck places they are experiencing in their crime stories.

Assignment: Send the draft of your crime story to your small group. Read other's drafts and make notes to share with the writers.

Week 13– The Writer's Room

In class workshop:

Use this week to workshop first draft of stories.

Assignment:

Based on the small group feedback, rewrite final draft of your crime story.

Week 14 – You're a Crime Scribe Now

- Pacing yourself as you write.
- Tips for establishing a writing habit.
- Checklist for rewrites and polishes.
- What to do when you've written yourself into a corner.

In class workshop: In small groups workshop the first draft of each student's crime story. Divide students into groups the week before and have students send out their script to their group so they can read ahead.

Assignment: Rewrite!

Week 15 – Back in the Writer's Room

Use this week to get students into writing groups where they can workshop their scripts before moving onto the polish draft. Focus should be on polishing, not reworking plot, structure, or character choice. Tweak lines of dialogue, move scenes if needed, clean up sentence structure, get another set of eyes on spelling and punctuation.

In class workshop: TV Writer's room simulated workshops.

Assignment: Polish and complete final draft of your crime story.

Week 16 – Mystery Solved

- Lectures are over.
- Use class time to screen another crime show.
- Final exam (if offered)

In class workshop: View an older crime film or crime show as a class.

After the screening, discuss the show based on what you have learned about real life forensics and how it's changed and been portrayed over the decades of film and TV. How did the story accurately portray forensics and crime? What would you change to make it better or more authentic? What science or technology was or wasn't available that is available now?

Assignment: Final draft of crime script due.

Author:

Long before American television was saturated with *CSI*, Jennifer Dornbush was living her own CSI adventure with her family in northern Michigan where her father worked as Medical Examiner from their home. Trained in death investigation from an early age, Jennifer has twenty years insight into the forensic world. To round out her knowledge of death investigation Jennifer completed over 360 hours of CSI training. She has used these experiences and training to scribe *Forensic Speak*, a monumental

resource for crime writers and crime drama fans. Jennifer's unique childhood has gifted her with uncanny fodder for storytelling, which she uses to pen crime stories for film and television.

Jennifer serves as adjunct professor of screenwriting and rhetoric in Los Angeles and San Diego. She received a bachelor's degree from Trinity College, Palos Heights, IL; and a Master's Degree from DePaul University, Chicago.

Learn more and sign up for Jennifer's *Forensic Speak Newsletter* at: www.jenniferdornbush.com