

Master of Arts (MA) - Scriptwriting Stream: advice to applicants

On the following pages, Director of Scriptwriting Ken Duncum offers advice to potential applicants, gives a detailed course overview and answers many of the frequently asked questions about this stream of the MA in Creative Writing.

Please note that the advice below is a supplement to the information for MA applicants on our [MA in Creative Writing page](#). For general information or advice about this programme of study, you should also visit the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences' [MA page](#).

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Introduction

Hi, I'm Ken Duncum. I am a scriptwriter who works in theatre, television and film. I successfully worked as a freelance scriptwriter across a number of forms and genres for 15 years before beginning teaching this course in 2002. See more about me [here](#). My position at the University allows me to continue writing which is essential to me because as much as I enjoy teaching I am first and foremost a writer. I've also had substantial experience as a mentor, script editor and script doctor.

I have been teaching the MA Scriptwriting course since its inception in 2002. I've developed it and continue to develop it with the aim of spurring as much creative and craft growth as possible for each writer within a single year. My intention is to teach craft and develop art in a stimulating and supportive environment. I am always aware that I am only part of the course and that what each writer gets from their nine classmates – through their support, encouragement, challenge and feedback – is perhaps the most valuable aspect of the year.

Course Philosophy

My philosophy for the MA Scriptwriting course:

1. It is overwhelmingly practical – writers learn by doing, the focus of the course is writing, and in particular your major, full-length project (feature film, theatre play or TV series) which will be completed to third draft stage by the end of the year.

2. It's a short year (really only 8 months) – my aim is to get as much writing done in that time as possible. You will always be working on something.
3. It's a small class – ten writers only – enabling a more personal hands-on teaching approach and encouraging the class to form a mutually supportive writers group.
4. I am interested in helping writers find or develop their 'voice', finding out what the story is you want to tell and working with you to bring that out.
5. We discuss and make use of various theories of scriptwriting but I do not rigidly subscribe to any one method or school of thought.
6. Although we touch on marketplace considerations the course is less geared towards 'how do I get a film made' and more towards growing as a writer, writing as an art.
7. The course aims to cover a variety of different scriptwriting forms - during the year you will have at least some experience of writing film, theatre, television and radio.

Before you Apply

Before beginning your application here are some things you should consider:

Prerequisite: there is a formal requirement that, before being admitted to a Master's programme, you must have an undergraduate degree or equivalent. If you have concerns about fulfilling this requirement, please [contact me](#).

This year? Consider whether it's the right time for you to take the course. The course will be run every year but you will only be able to do it once. For younger applicants, particularly those graduating with an undergraduate degree after 15 or 16 years of continuous 'school', ask yourself whether it might not be better to do the course after a couple of years of other experience? Is it the right time in your life – and in your development as a writer?

Time commitment: consider carefully whether you are capable of undertaking the necessary time commitment. A good comparison is that the course is equivalent to working a full-time job, requiring about 40 hours a week of your time. Often, people have to have a part-time job while they're doing the course in order to make ends meet. If part-time work is getting above about twenty hours a week then it's probably going to start impacting negatively on what you can achieve in the course. Other aspects of your life – eg family – have also got to be balanced. Think carefully about whether it's all going to fit in. Watching writers' progress in the course it becomes clearer to me every year that those with most time to commit are those who get most out of it.

About your Application

Writing Sample

What's most important in your application is your writing sample. This is primarily what I will base my decision on as to who is accepted into the course. This sample should always be actual script if possible – rather than prose treatment, scene breakdowns or outlines. I want to see how you write a script.

It should be about twenty pages – taken from a single script or made up of a number of excerpts or short works. Submit the script or combination of scripts that you feel shows you off to greatest advantage. The script doesn't have to relate to the project you're proposing, and could even be something you write specifically for the application.

Major Project Proposal

This is only a proposal at the application stage. Writers accepted into the course can and do change their major projects. So don't feel you're committing yourself to something you might not want to pursue. You're pitching the idea, so give me an overview, tell me who it's about and what it's about, give me some sense of where the drama/comedy/excitement is coming from, and why you want to write it.

Suggested Reading List

This is just a starting point. Again, if accepted, I will negotiate your actual reading list with you at the beginning of the year. This just gives me an idea of the way you're thinking about your proposed project and your learning as a writer.

See reading list format under Reading Programme.

Victoria Postgraduate Scholarships

Visit our [Scholarships and Prizes](#) page for information relevant to our MA programme. All scholarship enquiries should be directed to Victoria University's [Scholarships Office](#).

Please note: the relevant scholarship application deadline is 1 November each year – the same as the MA application deadline. This means you need to apply for the MA and any relevant scholarship at the same time; don't wait to find out if you have been offered a place before considering scholarships. You should also be aware that scholarships are limited and the process is highly competitive.

Application deadline

Applications close November 1 each year. I generally get 30-40 applications for the 10 places on the course. I'm usually able to choose the class and notify all applicants by mid-December.

What if I don't get in?

If you DON'T get in, please keep the following things in mind:

- entrance to the course seems to be becoming more competitive each year, with most of the applicants being 'in the ballpark'
- it's just my opinion and I've been known to be wrong
- you can re-apply for the course in subsequent years, and this has been successful for people in the past
- there are other courses available in the Wellington region (an Honours course in Scriptwriting as part of the School of English, Film, Theatre, and Media Studies here at Victoria University, also courses at Whitireia Polytechnic) which have formed a bridge to the MA class for some writers
- the important thing is **KEEP WRITING!**

What if I do get in?

If you DO get in:

- you'll need to finalise any outstanding enrolment paperwork – Victoria Enrolments will contact you directly about this
- over the summer before the course starts I ask each member of the class to read three basic scriptwriting texts (*The Screenwriter's Workbook* by Syd Field, *Making A Good Script Great* by Linda Seger, *The Writer's Journey* by Christopher Vogler)

- I'll get you to write a short biographical note about yourself which I'll send round the class so you know a little about each other before you meet; thinking about your project is fine but I usually suggest that you don't start writing it until the course has started (enabling the idea to be discussed). These bios also go up on our website.
- I'll have an initial meeting with you before classes start to talk about the year, your proposed project, possible reading list etc.

About the Course

Classes run throughout the first two trimesters – ie. from late February to mid-October – and total five hours per week. All sessions are conducted by me and are held in the Workshop Room, GSH 102 at the International Institute of Modern Letters (IIML), 16 Wai-te-ata Rd on the Kelburn campus of Victoria University of Wellington.

There are usually 48 classes during the year. You are required to attend all classes.

Meeting times

Tuesday Workshop: 10:00am-1:00pm

At the Tuesday Workshop a range of exercise work is undertaken and the results presented and discussed. This is also where class members present their major project work-in-progress.

Until Easter, workshops will concentrate on weekly exercises.

Throughout the second trimester, feedback on Draft 1 (or 2) of your major project will take place in this session as well as exercise work focusing on your project.

Wednesday Workshop: 10:00am-12:00noon

The Wednesday Workshop is an opportunity for class discussion and practical exercises and also provides a forum for guest visits by writers and industry professionals. Storylining for the TV drama series outline exercise (see below) also takes place in this session.

Feedback- philosophy

'No one treated the play as an invalid needing radical surgery; no one insisted on forcing the play toward production before it was ready. What was provided instead was a patient set of mirrors that reflected and revealed the play to me so that I could better understand what I really wanted to say and figure out how to say it.' (Michael Wright)

My intention is to provide a safe environment for writers to receive honest, forthright and supportive feedback on their work. As much as possible I try to ensure that everyone checks their ego at the door and concentrates on being the 'patient set of mirrors' in the above quote.

Reading Programme

You are required to read and/or view extensively in areas related to your major writing project and to the craft of scriptwriting in general. To do this, you follow an individually designed programme (agreed upon with me) of film/video titles, theatre productions, scripts,

books on scriptwriting and research material relevant to your project. You report on your reading/viewing by keeping a regular Reading Journal where you note your responses to your list of agreed films, videos, scripts or books. You should have completed your reading/viewing list and submitted your Reading Journal (minimum length 6,000 words) by the end of September.

List template

Your reading list should be made up of about twenty items divided into four categories:

1. Books on scriptwriting (6)
2. Scripts chosen because you think you can learn something from them in relation to your main project (5)
3. Films/play productions/TV dramas chosen for the same reasons (5)
4. Any research you may need to do (4)

Portfolio (Major Project)

It is expected that you will complete 3 drafts of a full-length work as your portfolio project, with first, second and third drafts due on specific dates during the year. In terms of timings, a feature film script would be expected to be of a duration not less than 80 minutes. The duration of a full-length playscript similarly should be not less than 80 minutes. The duration of TV scripts should conform to the commercial half-hour or hour. Students undertaking a TV project as their Portfolio should discuss with me the amount and type of work that should be delivered throughout the year and for final assessment.

During the first part of the year writers pitch and discuss ideas for their major projects. Once projects have been decided and some pre-planning done, first drafts are written over 6-8 weeks and are due in at the halfway point of the year. The focus in Draft 1 is on exploration, Draft 2 concentrates on building structure, characters and character arcs, while Draft 3 refines and distills the script, focusing on editing and trimming scenes, action and dialogue. Ideally, the different nature of the work on each draft results in significant growth and transformation of the story through the year, arriving at a strong and streamlined version of the script which will provide a solid basis for interesting producers in both project and writer.

Supervisors

You will be discussing the progress of your portfolio work at workshop meetings. You will also be assigned a portfolio supervisor, with whom you will have regular meetings (these should average out at one hour per fortnight across the teaching year). As against the diversity of views you are likely to meet in workshops, your supervisor provides the response of a single, continuing reader. Your supervisor will respond to your work as you write it and act as final reader at the point when the folio is to be submitted.

I usually act as supervisor for seven out of the ten writers in the class. The three remaining writers are assigned an external supervisor each, usually an established professional scriptwriter. Who these supervisors are and which writers they are matched with is worked out by me during the first half of the year.

Major Exercises

Apart from your main project there are two major writing exercises during the year. These are:

- 30 Minute Script – written during the early part of the year. If your major project is film then you will be expected to write a half-hour play for this exercise, if your major project is theatre, then you will write a thirty minute film script. This exercise is usually delivered at the end of March or in early April. The delivered script will provide a basis for further exercise work through the year, and may be the source of a 10 minute reading performed by actors in a city venue as part of the Writers On Mondays series, usually in September.
- TV Series Outline – written during the middle of the year. This is an outline (including concept, character breakdowns and one-page story outlines) for a 7 x 1-hour drama series for television. During the first half of the year you will have an in-class storylining session on your series.

Readers Reports

In addition to verbal feedback given in class, you will be expected to write a more detailed Reader's Report during the year. This will be on a fellow class member's first draft.

Industry Placements

You are expected to complete about 40 hours of industry placement. Arrangements will be negotiated during the first half of the academic year. Dates for placements are dependent on the schedules of production companies and other host organisations, but every effort will be made to arrange placements to coincide with the June/July mid-year break.

Rehearsed Readings

Ten minute excerpts of exercise work are performed by actors as part of the Writers on Mondays series in September of each year.

Assessment

Assessment is based entirely on the Portfolio script you submit at the end of the year. At present there is provision for the MA degree to be awarded with a grade of pass, merit or distinction. Three examiners - your supervisor, an external reader from the scriptwriting community, and an industry representative - will read each portfolio and make their recommendations. Copies of their written reports will be returned to you.

Award

The David Carson-Parker Embassy Prize (Scriptwriting) of \$2000 is awarded to the best script submitted by a CREW 592 student in any one year.

Project Scholarships

See our [Scholarships and Prizes page](#).

Endorsements by graduates

If you are curious about graduates' experience of the course, you can read a selection of comments on our [Graduate Showcase Page](#). You can also read about the script-related projects of PhD students on our [PhD Profiles page](#).

Hear from Scriptwriting Students

Find out about current and past [MA Scriptwriting students](#)