

Syllabus

The Chennai International Screenwriting Workshop is essentially designed to familiarise aspiring screenwriters with the basic principles of the craft of screenwriting. While it would be silly to assume that in five-six days anyone can learn how to write screenplays, the aim is to set participants on the path to explore their individuality, discover their own stories, develop their own narrative styles and locate their unique voices. We believe that this can happen if they receive at least a basic introduction to the universal principles of storytelling in cinema, augmented with references to those found in age-old myths and classics, which have stood the test of time across cultures. It is our hope that if aspiring screenwriters understand and introject these principles, it frees up the unique writer in each one. As illustrations, examples from a wide range of films belonging to different cinematic cultures and genres will be used. If participants can get a sense of the range of possibilities that the screenplay form allows, it becomes easier for them to determine what appeals to them.

We do believe that the key skill a screenwriter needs is the ability to communicate an experience unique to his imagination but in a form that is accessible to a wide audience. Frankly, at this level, all distinctions between so-called 'art cinema', 'commercial cinema', 'alternative cinema', 'mainstream cinema', etc. dissolve. The overriding principle – that feature films are a medium of telling stories – will guide the approach of the instructors at the workshop, without any bias towards any particular type or genre of cinema.

To reiterate – this workshop will serve as just an introduction to the craft of screenwriting. Since the instructors believe that it would be good to introduce all the elements of the screenplay to the participants, by necessity the approach will be more extensive than intensive.

The range of topics that shall be covered during the workshop include:

STORIES AND STORY-TELLING

Story-telling through different media. Telling stories using cinema.

ELEMENTS OF THE SCREENPLAY

An initial introduction to the essential elements of a script and the process of screenwriting.

THEME, PREMISE

The omnipresence of the theme and the premise in the screenplay.

PLOT

Creating the main plot, the important sub-plots.

Structuring the story.

THE NATURE OF DRAMA: CONFLICT

The essential need to understand and use conflict as the source of dramatic energy. Types of conflict.

CHARACTER & CHARACTERISATION

Creating credible, multi-dimensional, unique characters with universal resonances. Avoiding stereotypes.

STRUCTURE

Types of structure: classical 3-act structure (Set-up – Confrontation – Resolution), its different interpretations. Exploring alternative methods.

Using the principles of structure to condense vast material into viable screenplays.

WRITING THE TREATMENT

The treatment as the definitive blueprint for the screenplay.

WRITING THE STEP-OUTLINE

Breaking up the treatment/sequences into individual scenes and writing the step-outline in a professional format.

SCENE DESIGN

The scene. Learning to understand the design and structure of a scene with the aid of some examples.

WRITING DIALOGUE

Role and functions of dialogue. Writing less for more impact. (With the help of examples.)

MYTHOLOGY, HERO'S JOURNEY

A brief introduction to Joseph Campbell's approach and observations. The universality of mythic patterns across time and cultures. A run-through of the narrative structure and stages of the monomyth or the 'Hero's Journey'.

INDUSTRIAL ASPECTS OF INDIAN CINEMA (with special emphasis on the Tamil film industry)

A peep into the aspects of the film industry that concern the screenwriter. Some words of advice to the new screenwriter.

Note: In a brief session, screenwriting software – Movie Magic Screenwriter and Final Draft – will be demonstrated.