

LAW, FILM & CULTURE
Capital University Law School, Fall 2026
Adjunct Prof. Mark Lewis
Kitrick, Lewis & Staley-Sladek Co., L.P.A.
mlewis@lawkls.com

I. LAW, FILM & CULTURE

In this course, we use film as both mirror and magnifying glass for the law. Movies reflect society's beliefs about justice, truth, and the legal profession. Movies also magnify the ethical dilemmas, storytelling choices, and cultural forces that shape our work as lawyers.

But we study more than legal storytelling on the screen. Throughout the semester, we will also work with actual cases drawn from legal practice, using them to examine how lawyers find the story within a complicated set of facts, understand and represent their clients, make difficult strategic and ethical choices, and persuade judges, juries, opposing counsel, clients, and one another.

This course, therefore, invites you to think like *both* a lawyer and a storyteller.

We pursue the following goals together this semester:

1. **Explore professional identity.** Examine the values, habits, and attitudes that can sustain a meaningful and successful life in the law.
2. **Connect representation to reality.** Compare on-screen depictions of lawyers and legal institutions with actual legal practice and real cases.
3. **Learn to see and shape legal stories.** Examine how facts become narratives, and how choices about character, conflict, perspective, sequence, theme, and framing influence the way a case is understood.
4. **Practice persuasive advocacy.** Develop narrative, rhetorical, oral, and writing skills for communicating effectively with clients, courts, juries, opposing counsel, and other decision makers.
5. **Examine law within culture.** Analyze how justice, power, class, race, gender, and other cultural forces are portrayed and contested in legal narratives.
6. **Develop professional judgment and voice.** Build a critical vocabulary for evaluating law in popular culture and legal practice while articulating your own emerging commitments about what kind of lawyer you hope to become.

II. REQUIREMENTS & GRADING

Your work in this course will be evaluated across several dimensions — participation, reflection, and written analysis — to ensure that you engage with the material actively, think critically, and communicate effectively. This balance also helps preserve the integrity of your work in the era of AI tools, emphasizing skills and insights that can only come from you.

A. Films and Case Pairings

Each week you are responsible for:

1. Watching the assigned film before class.
2. Preparing for discussion by answering in writing the weekly Law–Film Confab questions (emailed by Prof. Lewis the week of class). You respond by emailing your written answers.
3. Actively listening and responding in class to both the movie discussion and the related real-world legal case presented by Prof. Lewis. Most weeks, in addition to our movie we will explore an actual case from our legal system to consider the objectives outlined above.

B. Class Participation – 25%

This includes:

- **In-class dialogue:** contributing ideas, asking questions, and building on peer comments.
- **Active listening:** engaging respectfully and attentively with others.
- **Preparation:** showing familiarity with both the film and the paired case.
- Attendance is required; more than three unexcused absences may result in up to a one-letter grade reduction.

C. Weekly Reflections – 25%

- Short (minimum 50 words) responses to the email Law–Film Confab questions.
- May be submitted electronically or, on certain weeks, written in-class to encourage real-time engagement without reliance on AI drafting tools.
- Designed to capture your evolving insights, not polished essays.

D. Short Paper – 25%

- **Length:** 3 double-spaced pages.
- **Focus:** An interpretive, jurisprudential, or thematic issue from the films and/or cases studied so far, with approval for alternative topics.

- May integrate both narrative analysis and legal reasoning, or explore creative writing approaches (examples will be provided in class).
- Due in mid-October (exact date TBA).

E. Final Paper – 25%

- **Length:** 5 double-spaced pages.
- **Focus:** In-depth analysis of one or more films (including optional outside films with approval) and related legal cases, applying course concepts on narrative, ethics, and cultural impact. Again, examples of prior papers will be shown in class.
- Must address both the cinematic and legal dimensions of the topic.
- Due at the final class session or a date approved in advance.

Summary of Grading Breakdown

- Class Participation – 25%
- Weekly Reflections – 25%
- Short Paper – 25%
- Final Paper – 25%

III. ASSIGNED FILMS AND THEMES BY CLASS:

Each film will be accompanied by an email confab the week before class that outlines the issues, questions and themes to be covered:

1. **Erin Brockovich** (2000)
Client-Centered Advocacy & the Unlikely Hero – Good lawyering begins with seeing people others overlook, listening to their stories, and finding a way to make those stories matter.
2. **Legally Blonde** (2001)
Professional Identity, Stereotypes & Authenticity – Becoming a lawyer need not mean becoming someone else; authenticity, empathy, and individuality can be sources of professional strength.
3. **The Burial** (2023)
Storytelling, Theatricality & Framing as Legal Strategy – Legal persuasion depends not merely on having facts, but on finding the human story that gives those facts meaning and understanding the audience who will hear it.
4. **My Cousin Vinny** (1992)
The Art of Good Lawyering – Effective advocacy often comes less from polish or pedigree than from preparation, persistence, knowing the facts, noticing what others miss, and connecting authentically with people.

5. **12 Angry Men** (1957)
Moral Courage, Empathy & Persuasion Without Ego – Persuasion begins with curiosity rather than certainty: asking the next question, testing assumptions, and creating enough doubt for others to reconsider what they think they know.
6. **Anatomy of a Fall** (2023)
Proof, Truth & Narrative Ambiguity – Law constructs coherent stories from incomplete and ambiguous facts, but the most persuasive story is not necessarily the truth.
7. **The Lincoln Lawyer** (2011)
Ethics, Justice & the Morally Flexible Lawyer – Professional skill without a moral compass has limits; sooner or later, lawyers must decide not simply what the rules permit, but what kind of lawyer they intend to be.
8. **Michael Clayton** (2007)
Professional Identity, Moral Compromise, & the Cost of Accommodation – A lawyer can become extraordinarily good at the job while gradually losing sight of what the job is doing to him or her; professional identity is shaped by the compromises we repeatedly choose to make.
9. **Dark Waters** (2019)
Moral Courage, Perseverance & the Long Pursuit of Truth – Some forms of advocacy demand years rather than moments of heroism; meaningful legal work can require persistence when institutions, incentives, and even ordinary life are pushing us to stop.
10. **Just Mercy** (2019)
Race, Justice & Human Dignity – Justice begins when getting close enough to see the person whom the system has reduced to a category; advocacy becomes transformative when human connection accompanies legal skill.
11. **Student Choice Vote for Movie of the Week**
Putting Our Ideas to Work – The class will choose from a curated list and use the semester's vocabulary of story, character, conflict, persuasion, ethics, professional identity, and justice to consider what another film can teach us about law and lawyers.
12. **The People v. O.J. Simpson** (Selected Episodes, American Crime Story 2016)
Law, Celebrity, Race, Gender, Media & the Cultural Construction of Justice – Legal stories do not remain inside the courtroom: lawyers, clients, media, and culture compete to determine what events mean, and the cultural verdict may prove as powerful as the legal one.

IV. OTHER IMPORTANT ITEMS

Accessibility Services

Capital University is committed to providing reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities to ensure equal access to their educational experience. If you are seeking academic accommodations, you are required to work through the Office of Accessibility Services. Students with disabilities are encouraged to connect with the Office of Accessibility Services as early as possible to establish accommodations but may request services at any time.

Further information may be obtained by contacting the Office of Accessibility Services by email at accessibilityservices@capital.edu or by telephone at (614) 236-6611. Additional information regarding the process for registering with the Office of Accessibility Services may be found at <https://www.capital.edu/about/accessibility-services/>. This information is available in an alternate format upon request.

Exam Accommodation Policy

If you are approved for testing accommodations, you must submit an accommodated exam request for each exam you intend to use your accommodations. This request is submitted through your [Accommodate](#) account. **Accommodated exam Requests are due two weeks before midterms and one month before finals.**

Only the Dean or Dean's delegate can approve student requests to reschedule examinations; "instructors cannot excuse students from taking exams at the regularly scheduled time for any reason." Manual of Policies & Procedures (MPP) § 4.8.03 (A).

The Law School's guidelines on requests for exceptions to policies and procedures based on physical or mental disability are outlined in the Manual of Policies and Procedures, Section 6.5 (<https://www.law.capital.edu/academics/juris-doctor/manual-of-policies-and-procedures/>).

Attendance Policy

The American Bar Association requires law schools to ensure that students regularly attend class. Capital University Law School therefore requires regular and punctual attendance. For in-person classes, you must be physically present in the classroom. For online or hybrid courses, you must attend as specified by your instructor.

You **must attend at least 70% of a course's scheduled class hours** to meet the attendance requirement. The school calculates credit hours as equivalent to 55 minutes of instruction per week per credit hour over a 14-week semester. (For example, a 3-credit course equals 165 minutes of required attendance per week.)

Administrative Withdrawal Procedure

If you are absent from more than 30% of scheduled class hours, the Dean or Associate Dean of Academic Affairs may administratively withdraw you from the course. Before doing so, the Dean or Associate Dean will notify you and discuss alternatives, such as a leave of absence. Administrative withdrawal results in a "W" grade on your transcript. If you retake the course, you will not receive credit for prior attendance or work.

Excused Absences

Generally, there are no excused absences except in these circumstances:

- An absence approved by the Accessibility Services Office
- An absence due to armed services orders (including reserve components)
- An absence required by applicable law

You must submit documentation of any excused absence to the Registrar *before* the absence occurs.

Instructor Attendance Policies

In addition to this attendance policy, an instructor may establish an attendance policy that is stricter than the school's requirement. For example, the instructor may impose a grade penalty if a student misses more than a specified number of classes (such as 2 absences). All absences count toward both the instructor's policy and the school's 70% attendance requirement. If the student's absences reach 30%, administrative withdrawal applies regardless of your instructor's individual attendance policy.

Center for Health and Wellness

You may experience situations or face personal challenges that affect academic progress, social development, or emotional wellbeing. Capital University offers a variety of confidential services to help you through difficult times. Contact Capital University's Center for Health and Wellness by phone at (614) 236-6114, by email at chw@capital.edu, or in person at the Kline Center. 24-hour mental health support is available by calling the Center for Health and Wellness at (614) 236-6114 or After Hours Crisis Line to Connect with an On-Call Counselor (5 p.m. to 9 a.m.) at (855) 795-4576.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Capital University aims to create a supportive community where students feel empowered, valued, and celebrated for their unique identities and experiences. Navigating law school can be challenging, particularly for students from underrepresented backgrounds, and the Office of DEI offers a range of services designed to ensure that all students have the resources to succeed.

The Assistant Dean of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is Dr. Bren Sutter. Dean Sutter can be reached by email at bsutter2@law.capital.edu.

Human Dignity and Bias Incident Policy

Members of the Capital University community must respect all persons regardless of age, ancestry, color, disability, gender identity or expression, genetic information, military status, national or ethnic origin, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, protected veteran status, or any other characteristic protected by law. Capital University deems it unacceptable for its students, faculty and staff to engage in conduct (words or actions) that is intended to be, or that is reasonably foreseeable to be, threatening, abusive or intimidating to any member of the university community including students, faculty, staff, guests and contracted services employees. Conduct that violates this policy typically:

1. Has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual or individuals' work or educational environment; or
2. Is directed at an individual or individuals on the basis of their protected status; or
3. Is abusive or severely humiliating.

Bias incidents and hate crimes are antithetical to the standards and values of the University, violate University policy and, in some instances, state and federal law, and will not be tolerated. If you believe you have witnessed a violation of the Human Dignity and Bias Incident Policy, you are encouraged to reach out to Dean Sutter at bsutter2@law.capital.edu. You may also file a bias report any time at <https://www.capital.edu/faculty-and-staff/human-resources/bias-incident-reporting-protocol/>. You have the right to file a report anonymously.

Exam Conflicts:

Exams occur during the examination period designated on the academic calendar. You are expected to take your exam at the scheduled time, with the following exceptions:

Scheduling Conflicts:

An exam conflict exists when you are scheduled for two or more exams with beginning times within 24 hours of each other. (For example, an exam beginning at 8:00 a.m. Monday does not conflict with an exam beginning at 8:00 a.m. Tuesday.) The Assistant Dean of Student Administration (or the Dean's delegate) determines whether a conflict exists and authorizes rescheduling.

Personal Exam Conflict

A personal exam conflict exists if you have an illness, a documented physical or learning disability, or a compelling and unforeseen reason that prevents you from taking the exam at the scheduled time.

To request relief for either type of conflict, follow the process described on the Law School website: <https://www.law.capital.edu/academics/exam-resources/exam-conflicts/>.

Generative AI Policy

Pursuant to the Law School Honor Code, you may not use generative artificial intelligence (AI)—including but not limited to ChatGPT, Claude, Copilot, Lexis+ AI, Practical Law AI, Westlaw AI-assisted research, or similar tools—unless your professor has expressly permitted it for a specific assignment.

Permission to use a computer does not include permission to use generative AI.

There may be certain assignments where generative AI is permitted. Professor Lewis will explain in class and provide email instruction on such assignments.

Student Success

Capital University is committed to supporting your success as a student and as a person. Student Success services are available to help work through any challenges or barriers to success, to guide you to the best resources available, and to help you stay on a consistent path to success. For assistance, contact Professor Rebecca Petrilli at rpetrilli@law.capital.edu or Professor Lauren Emptage at lemptage@law.capital.edu.

Title IX – Sexual Harassment, Discrimination, and Misconduct

Capital University is committed to ensuring a safe environment free of discrimination on the basis of sex, including sexual misconduct and harassment. If you experienced an incident of sex or gender-based discrimination, harassment, or sexual misconduct, we encourage you to report it.

You may report the incident to the University's Title IX office by email at titleix@capital.edu. The Law School's Title IX Deputy Coordinator is Dean Sutter located in Room 388 who can assist with answering questions and understanding reporting options.

Capital University faculty are committed to supporting students, however, please understand that faculty are "responsible employees" of the University and must report any incident of sex- or gender-based discrimination, harassment, and sexual misconduct to the University's Title IX Coordinator.

Please refer to Capital University's Sex- or Gender-Based Discrimination, Harassment, and Sexual Misconduct policy for more information on reporting options:

<https://www.capital.edu/about/title-ix-and-sexual-harassment/>.