

## COMEDY WRITING GENRES

CTWR 534  
SECTION 19253D  
FALL 2014

Instructor: Russ Woody  
Class Schedule: Wednesdays, 10 AM – 12:50 PM  
Class Location: Rm. SCA 203  
Office Hours: Before and after class and by appointment  
Contact Information: russwoody@aol.com

### **Course Objective:**

Garnering an approach and practical understanding of writing spec scripts for the half-hour sitcom. The completed script you write will serve as the final for the course, as well as a sample of your work in the industry.

### **Course Description:**

The course itself will follow the basic steps used in putting together a half-hour spec script. We'll start with an overview of the sitcom writing process, room protocol and general dos and don'ts in the industry. During this time we'll also be discussing the story-discovering process: how to get past blocks, how to stimulate the creative process, where to find stories both inside and outside of your own experiences. We'll also discuss structuring the story (since it will naturally come into play): the advantage of using a beat sheet for perspective, and digging for the heart of the story and then how to build it.

You'll have three sitcoms from which to choose (for your spec script):  
(TO BE ANNOUNCED LATER – THREE PROMINENT SHOWS)

We'll also discuss the difference between writing for a single-camera show vs. a multiple-camera show. This discussion promises to be quite spirited, as we'll explore the many exhilarating facets of script length and line-spacing. Fights often break out. As well, we'll look at each of these sitcoms and discuss the type of stories used, their use of sets, the distinguishing characteristics of the characters, the show's use of A-stories, B-stories and C-stories.

Naturally the next step is the pitch. This part of the course involves choosing from the best of your story ideas and honing them into something pitch-able. The actual pitch itself – for many writers the most horrifying part of writing – will be done with the rest of the class, where you'll learn to both give constructive notes and take them without contemplating suicide.

Once you have decided upon a particular story, we will again take a look at structure in more detail, since you'll have something to apply it to. (There will be, btw, great emphasis placed on STRUCTURE in this course, so prepare yourself emotionally – if you have a particular disdain for the words “beat” and “sheet”... this class will be a nightmare for you.)

Outlining from your beat sheet will be done within the week after your pitch. When outlines are handed in, you'll need to read other outlines so that you can give thoughtful/constructive notes during the next class. You'll also have to endure receiving thoughtful/constructive notes from the other thoughtful/constructive students in the class. As well, we'll explore what to do – how to deal with – notes you may receive that make no goddamn sense.

You will be given two weeks to write the first draft of your script. During that time – and probably prior – we'll discuss pushing from one end of the script to the other and the value of the “vomit draft” (very important). Midway through the first draft, you'll be asked to hold up the pages of your vomit draft for display, so that others can ruthlessly criticize your penmanship. Class discussions might include the pervasive pain and self-doubt of the writer and the extraordinary allure of mundane housework while writing.

Once your first draft is handed in, it will be read and evaluated by other class members, who will give thoughtful/constructive notes *again*. As you will do for them and their scripts. If it hasn't happened before this point, there will probably be a discussion of agents: how to find one, what to look for, what to expect, the “tacit agreement” and whether agents are actually similar to human beings. There will be one more draft of your script before the polished draft. The second draft of your script will be considered the most important and will count for 30% of your grade, while the Final Teleplay will be worth 5% (the hard work has already been done). At the conclusion of the course, you are free to continue rewriting it well into the next millennium.

#### **Grading Criteria:**

Participation:	10%
Pitch:	20%
Outline:	20%
First Draft:	15%
Second Draft:	30%
Final Teleplay:	5%

As per Writing Division policy the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:

A	100% to 94%	C	76% to 73%
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A-	93% to 90%	C-	72% to 70%
B+	89% to 87%	D+	69% to 67%
B	86% to 83%	D	66% to 63%
B-	82% to 80%	D-	62% to 60%
C+	79% to 77%	F	59% to 0%

### **Writing Division Attendance Policy:**

Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Two unexcused absences will result in your grade being lowered by one full point (ex: A to a (A-)). A third unexcused absence will result in your grade being lowered another full point (ex: B to a (B-)). Your grade will be lowered by one point for every absence after. Two late arrivals equate to one full absence.

In order for absence to be excused the student must have approval from the instructor and provide documentation at the next attended class session.

Please note that if you are a “Writing for Screen and Television” major/minor you must receive a grade of a C or better in order to receive degree credit. If you have any questions about the minimum grade required for credit please check with your home department.

If you have an emergency and must miss class please contact your instructor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

### **Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:**

Students will be allowed to bring their laptops to class and may use them when we are reviewing material as a group, or the student is referring to something for the benefit of the class. The rest of the time students will be expected to keep their laptops closed. Cell phones should be turned off, as any that ring during class will require a medically trained expert to retrieve.

### **Digital Information Loss Policy:**

Students are expected to back up all of their writing on a *cloud service* AND a *flash drive*. Seriously. A crashed computer or loss of a file is not an excuse, but rather a testament to a disconcerting lack of mental acuity to grasp even the simplest of life’s realities. Dogs cannot eat clouds.

### **Class Schedule:**

Please note that all dates are subject to change at the discretion of the instructor.

Week 1: OVERVIEW

Introduction – your goals and feelings about comedy  
 General step-by-step of the process involved in spec scripts and writing  
 Industry dos and don'ts  
 View DVD with a discussion of purpose and structure  
 ASSIGNMENT: Read Chapters 3-4 in *The TV Writer's Handbook*  
 Read an available sitcom script

#### Week 2: OVERVIEW

Finding stories – sparking the creative process  
 There's no time for "writer's block" in television  
 Putting a story together – this will be a whiteboard experience  
 Rolling with the room – an essential part of television writing  
 Preparing for the pitch  
 ASSIGNMENT: Prepare your pitch for following week

#### Week 3: THE PITCH

Students will pitch their stories  
 Restructuring stories – the Beat Sheet (all important)  
 Discussion of B and C stories  
 ASSIGNMENT: Prepare Beat Sheet from pitch and possible B/C stories  
 Read Chapters 7-8

#### Week 4: THE PITCH

Group will discuss any problem areas in stories  
 Students will pitch and work on B/C stories  
 Integrating A, B and C stories in the Beat Sheet  
 Explanation of the outline – adding jokes and dialogue, etc.  
 Pay attention to English  
 ASSIGNMENT: Write outline

#### Week 5: THE OUTLINE

Outlines due  
 Lecture on preparing the brain for writing  
 Reading reading reading – the Shakespeare theory  
 Hearing the rhythm of a show  
 Learning to "be with" the work  
 First – find the reality of the moment  
 Pushing through to the end  
 Be loose – the value of the vomit draft  
 Writing vertically *and* horizontally  
 ASSIGNMENT: Read Chapter 13

#### Week 6: THE OUTLINE

General notes from instructor on outlines  
 Group-work on outlines  
 Address any restructuring – possible beat sheet work  
 ASSIGNMENT: Write a vomit draft of script

#### Week 7: THE FIRST DRAFT

Vomit drafts should be finished, but not acknowledged  
 Discussion of problems encountered  
 Lecture on Writing for the enemy  
 Looking at jokes – learning from others  
 Pay attention to English again  
 ASSIGNMENT: On to the real First Draft

Week 8: THE FIRST DRAFT

Completed First Drafts are due  
 Writing is re-writing or what's been re-written from the rewrite  
 What can be misread, will be misread  
 Getting away from your work – the value a fresh look  
 ASSIGNMENT: Prepare notes on other First Drafts

Week 9: THE FIRST DRAFT

Notes on First Drafts will be given and gotten  
 Killing your children – learning to let go  
 Possible restructuring of problematic stories  
 ASSIGNMENT: Address any notes given

Week 10: THE FIRST DRAFT

Notes on any remaining First Drafts  
 Discussion of problem areas  
 Possible restructuring issues  
 ASSIGNMENT: Start Second Draft

Week 11: THE SECOND DRAFT

Moving this from here to there  
 Dealing with notes that suck  
 In the zone – that glassy look when talking to friends  
 ASSIGNMENT: Keep writing  
 Read Chapter 14

Week 12: THE SECOND DRAFT

Completed Second Drafts due  
 Discussing of the process – things discovered  
 Reworking jokes – nailing it down  
 The value of coming around again  
 ASSIGNMENT: Prepare notes on Second Drafts

Week 13: THE SECOND DRAFT

Notes on second drafts  
 ASSIGNMENT: Address notes for the Finished Draft

Week 14: POLISHING THE SCRIPT

Hand in Finished Drafts  
 How the pros do it

A re-write room session with two professional comedy writer/producers  
 ASSIGNMENT: One solid idea for the next spec script

#### Week 15: THE BUSINESS

Next script ideas presented/discussed  
 Agents and their assistants – a discussion  
 Freelancing script assignments – how those work  
 Working your way onto a writing staff  
 The writing staff, jobs and titles  
 ASSIGNMENT: Kick back, dude

#### **Statement for Students with Disabilities**

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Website and contact information for DSP:  
[http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home\\_index.html](http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html), (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 740-6948 (TDD only), (213) 740-8216 (FAX)  
[ability@usc.edu](mailto:ability@usc.edu).

#### **Statement on Academic Integrity**

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. *SCampus*, the Student Guidebook, ([www.usc.edu/scampus](http://www.usc.edu/scampus) or <http://scampus.usc.edu>) contains the University Student Conduct Code (see University Governance, Section 11.00), while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A.

Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at: <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/>. Information on intellectual property at USC is available at: <http://usc.edu/academe/acsen/issues/ipr/index.html>.

#### **Emergency Preparedness/Course Continuity in a Crisis**

In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC

executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies.

Please activate your course in Blackboard with access to the course syllabus. Whether or not you use Blackboard regularly, these preparations will be crucial in an emergency. USC's Blackboard learning management system and support information is available at [blackboard.usc.edu](http://blackboard.usc.edu).

**Disruptive Student Behavior**

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students' ability to learn and an instructor's ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.