

CTWR 557
SEMINAR IN THE BUSINESS OF WRITING AND PRODUCING TELEVISION
THE ON-SET EXPERIENCE

Day/Time: Tuesdays 7PM-11PM
Section: 19236 Session: 44 Course Credit: 2 units
Classroom: SCA 342
Instructor: Neely Swanson
Office hours: By appointment. Please call (310) 739-9103

COURSE OBJECTIVES/GOALS:

So much of what writers do is in isolation, either with other writers or alone. Television shows are produced by a team, of which the writer is an important member, but not the only member. Although aware that everything that is written has an impact on production, writers, by necessity spend less time on set. Often willing to be helpful in making script changes dictated by scheduling and costs, it would be helpful to the writing process as a whole to know what impact something as seemingly small as a two-person dialogue can have on the production when that dialogue is held in a moving car versus a parked car; or what the cost differential is with location shooting. Why do some scenes make it into the final cut and others don't? Knowing the factors that increase or decrease production costs in advance can make for a happier crew and a more appreciated writer, one who will be at the top of network, studio and director showrunner lists, especially as more and more studios and networks are dictating staff choices.

Reading the script, from initial production draft to final shooting draft will help uncover how the printed page is best translated to the visual image as well as revealing why those changes were made from the writing, directorial, casting, production and post-production standpoints. Much of the emphasis will be on guest lectures and discussions with above and below-the-line television staffs, but a highly recommended option for this course will be the supervised on-set shadowing experience that will go beyond copying and delivering scripts.

It is hoped that the supervised on-set shadowing will include observation of the preproduction process including casting, department head meetings, scouts, and production meeting; up-to a week on set observing all aspects of the production process from set-ups, rehearsal and shooting.

At the end of this course, the writer should have developed an engaging "elevator" speech, feel immersed in the family atmosphere created on-set during the production of a television show and know how his or her writing can be helpful in creating that environment.

COURSE FORMAT:

Weekly sessions will be a combination of lectures, open discussion and guest lectures by experts in the chosen topic. Each week in class the students will work on developing an engaging "elevator speech." Students will be expected to keep a journal of their experiences on set and turn it in at the completion of the course as part of the final examination.

Assignments:

- Mid Term Project
- Final

GRADES: (1 unexcused absence will lower the participation grade; 2 unexcused absences may result in failure of the class).

In-Class Participation*	10%	(includes attendance and active participation)
Mid Term Project	20%	
Final Project	20%	
Shadowing Participation by show contact)	50%	(includes the journal and assessment of student's comportment

Week 1 (July 5)

The AD. The thankless life of an AD made more difficult by a runaway script. How you can make a friend for life. (**Bruce Humphrey** – “The Practice” “CSI NY” “How to Get Away with Murder”)

Week 2 (July 14) **The Director.** What does the director look for when breaking down the script? In the casting session? The director is the writer’s interpretation tool – to be helped or hindered (**Arvin Brown**)

On-Set Etiquette. An introduction to the expectations of lower level employees and interns just beginning the observation and learning process. Anecdotal histories as well as common sense rules of behavior will be discussed (**Guest TBD**).

Week 3 (July 19) **The Executive Producer/Directing Showrunner.** How does he or she guide the show from beginning to end? What are the interactions with the writer/creator and how do you keep a show on the air – from the day-to-day through the long run (**Mike Robin, Executive Producer, Nip/Tuck; The Closer; Dallas; Major Crimes**).

Midterm assignment: Create a Continuity Breakdown of your own pilot script as illustrated by the materials provided by Bruce Humphrey. Consider adding additional detail (i.e. props and extras) to the Continuity in order to make your final schedules (the final exam) easier for you to devise. You will want to draw up a list of cast (both series regulars and guests) and give them numbers (series regulars are given the first numbers – with the primary star being #1) You will also want to devise a list of Stages (you may have 3) and figure out ahead of time which sets belong on which stage. If you have off-site locations, you will need to list them as well. Due July 26

Week 4 (July 26) **Why should I care what the DP thinks?** A discussion with a cinematographer. (**Jim Bagdonas, Director of Photography, Modern Family, Boston Legal, Chicago Hope...**)

Week 5 (August 2) **Development - How the Studio fits into this Picture.** How does the studio assist in getting and keeping a show up and running? What role do they play in choosing writers, directors and producers? (**Jeffrey Glaser, President of Content at Wondery**)

Week 6 (August 9) **Casting Director.** How do they break down the scripts? How do they make their decisions on who makes it to the list? Thinking outside the box and how it can help everyone expand where the episode is going. A discussion with a leading casting director. (**Jami Rudofsky – Gilmore Girls, Reality Show, In Gayle We Trust, The Practice and multiple features**)

The On-Set Shadowing experience (time placement dependent on show availability)

This shadowing experience should dovetail with and/or replace the topics of the weekly course schedule.

Week 1: Preproduction prep: Student will read the production draft of the script to be shot the next week. Having read the production draft of the script, the student will spend the week as a fly on the wall attending meetings related to the prep of production including, if allowed, casting sessions, department head meetings and culminating in the final production meeting prior to shooting. Special note should be taken in the casting and how the directorial choices influence how the script will be interpreted. Both the department head and final production

meetings will be devoted to determining which visual choices will be made and why (cost, director interpretation, written confines, visual enhancement).

Week 2: Shooting: Student will be present at the start of the shooting day (crew call) and will run any on-set errands necessary while staying close to the stage to observe lighting set ups, rehearsals, and shooting (POV, close-ups, coverage etc.). What are the director's interpretive choices for the script as opposed to or in confluence with those of the series regular actors? What are the different ways in which the shooting script can be interpreted and by whom? Who is present on stage during shooting – the writer? The producer? What roles are they functioning during shooting and what influence do they exert? Dailies of the previous day's shooting are generally shown during lunch or other breaks and the Intern should watch some of the dailies if allowed to get a better idea of how the script is being translated to film and why the director chose the shots he or she did.

Assessment: Upon completion of the shadowing, the student will turn in a day-by-day diary relating to the experience on the series episode, including a breakdown of the on-set family. The series episode contact will be asked to review the student's integration into the production.

Final Exam: Using your Continuity as a guide, prepare the one-line Schedule and Shooting Schedule for your pilot. Do not forget the Day-out-of-days that goes with the One-Line Schedule. Follow the examples presented in class for these schedules. Remember that you will need to determine the time it takes to shoot your basic scenes and listing the number of pages shot with the time it will take. This is necessary to discover how long each day will be. Always best to shoot for a 12 hour day, but be honest in your assessment – no points are taken off for having a 16 hour day (just know that your crew would hate you and so will the studio because of the overtime). Due August 12.

Required Reading:	TBD
Recommended Reading:	<i>The Mailroom</i> by David Rensin <i>Hollywood 101</i> by Frederick Levy

Note: This syllabus is a guide to **CTWR 557** and may be adjusted at the discretion of the professor depending on the availability of guests and other considerations.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* <https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/departments/departments-public-safety/>.

[safety/online-forms/contact-us](#). This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage sarc@usc.edu describes reporting options and other resources.

Support Systems

A number of USC's schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

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.