

School of Cinematic Arts
Writing Division
CTWR 324
Section 19296R (2.0 units)
Writing for Screen and Television
Introduction To TV Comedy Writing
FALL 2016
Wednesday 4:00PM-6:50PM
SCA 362
Professor: Larry Balmagia
balmagia@usc.edu
Office hours: Wednesdays by appointment

Pre-Requisites: CTWR 106b or CTWR 412 or CTWR 413

Course Statement:

This class is designed for students who have an interest in understanding and delving into the art and craft of writing for the half-hour television comedy. It will explore the reasons for the rules of TV writing as well as the very nature of sitcom and its evolution over the years. Television is a collaborative experience and so is its writing. That, too, will be explored and examined over the semester.

Course Goals:

- Exposure to the process of writing episodic TV Comedy
- Appreciation of outstanding comedy series writing
- How to choose a spec story from an existing comedic series
- Study of effective scenes from excellent TV scripts
- Overall development of comedy writing skills through comic scene construction

Course Objective:

To write scenes for various existing TV Comedy series that demonstrate professional skill in several current comic platforms, i.e multi-camera, single camera, and comic genres, i.e. romantic, family and workplace comedies.

To work on scenes with a writing partner to understand the collaborative nature of comedy writing. Taking part in the process of a Writers Room which mirrors the real world of TV Comedy.

As a class, break a story and collaborate on the writing of A COMPLETE EPISODE for a current comedy. This will serve as the final course project.

Course Theme: Comedy is Character. Each genre of TV comedy requires a understanding of character, which leads to creating conflict, which in turn leads to story, structure, theme, and ultimately what the Pros refer to as “the funny.”

Course Readings: (All course reading will be provided in PDF format via email. No book purchase is required.)

- Selected excerpts from *The TV Writer's Handbook* by Ellen Sandler.

- Various scripts for existing series.

Class Schedule and Assignments:

(Note: Syllabus schedule is subject to changes at the discretion of the professor.)

Week 1 – Introduction

Class introduction; syllabus.

Introduction to the principles of writing for an episodic TV comedy series -- how sitcom writing differs from other forms of screenwriting in conception, intention, characterization and structure.

Overview of the business of TV writing and the changing marketplace.

Watch an episode of a ‘classic’ 1/2 hour comedy to discuss and ‘deconstruct’.

Assignment: Read pilot episode of “*Mom*” (provided). Breakdown characters and story elements.

Week 2

Screen pilot of “*Mom*”.

Review and discuss the characters and differences between the content of the *Mom* pilot script and the final result on the screen. Discuss the characters and core relationships. “Reverse-engineer” the episode story into the story beats.

Watch episode of “*Rick and Morty*”. Discuss core character relationships and story structure.

Break into Writing Teams (two students per team).

Assignment: Using scripts provided as a guide, each team will write an original 2-3 minute scene for either “*Mom*” or “*Rick and Morty*”, capturing as closely as possible voice and tone.

Week 3

Workshop and discuss the chosen sitcom scenes. Discuss comedic conflict in a 2-3 minute scene and basic scene structure.

Watch episode of “Blackish”. Discuss character relationships and basic story structure, including “A” and “B” stories.

Watch episode of “Broad City”. Discuss character relationships and basic story structure, including “A” and “B” stories.

Discuss criteria for choosing which shows to consider when writing a ‘spec’ episode.

Assignment: Each writing team to select a series and come up with two (2) ‘spec’ episode ideas for a current show (following the criteria discussed in class).

Week 4

Writing teams will pitch episode ideas. Examine the scope and types of stories that work best in the 1/2-hour form. Examine how story ideas can be fresh and engaging, yet still draw upon the core character relationships and conflict of the series premise.

Discussion of how show writing staffs function. Overview of writing room dynamics and the process of collaboration. Discuss the giving, and taking, of notes from classmates.

*Split into two writing “staffs” (**Show A and Show B**) - consisting of three writing teams (six students) each - which will work together for the remainder of the semester on the Final Project; a full spec episode of a current series. Each staff will select a series for which to write a spec, and then collaborate on every phase: Story idea, beat sheet, outline, first and second drafts.*

Assignment: Each writing staff will come up with two episode ideas for their show. (Can be based on stories pitched in class, or can be totally new ideas).

Week 5

Workshop and discuss story ideas for both Shows. Break down overall story arcs on whiteboard. Discuss possible ‘B’ stories for each episode.

Assignment: Break down episode ideas into ‘beat sheets’. (Both groups).

Everyone is to watch at least two episodes of BOTH shows. You not only must be familiar with the show you are writing, but also the show you will be giving notes on.

Week 6

Mid-Term Exam---Short answer questions about all facets of comedy television writing covered to date in class.

Screen: Episodes of series chosen for each project. Examine tone and feel (pacing, etc.) of each show.

Go over beat sheets for both shows. Break into specific scenes to form a 'rough outline'.

Assignment: Both groups to begin expanding and refining outlines, adding detail and dialogue.

Week 7

Workshop: **Show A**

Story notes on full outline. Full class will discuss, enhance, and help revise as needed. The goal: to have a solid outline at the end of class from which to begin writing the draft.

Assignment: Show A - begin writing first draft - Act 1
Show B - week off. (Don't worry Show A, you'll get one later)

Week 8

Workshop: **Show B**

Story notes on full outline. Full class will discuss, enhance, and help revise as needed. The goal: to have a solid outline at the end of class from which to begin writing the draft.

Assignment: Show B - begin writing first draft - Act 1.
Show A - continue writing first draft - Act 1.

Week 9

Workshop: **Show A**

Table read and notes on first draft, Act 1. Discuss in terms of clarity and progression of story. Look for inconsistencies and repetition of information. Do the voices of the main characters ring true?

Assignment: Show A - begin writing Act 2 and Act 3.
Show B - continue writing Act 1.

Week 10

Workshop: **Show B**

Table read and notes on first draft, Act 1. Discuss as above.

Assignment: Show B - begin writing Acts 2 and 3.
Show A - continue writing Acts 2 and 3.

Week 11

Continue to discuss the principles applied to writing an episode and making it appear that it has one vision and point of view even though multiple writers have had a hand in the creation.

Workshop: **Show A**

Table read and notes on first draft, Acts 2 and 3.

Assignment: Show A - begin re-write of full script.
Show B - continue writing Acts 2 and 3.

Week 12

Workshop: **Show B**

Table read and notes on first draft, Acts 2 and 3.

Assignment: Show B - begin re-write of full script.
Show A - continue re-write of full script.

Week 13

Begin Writing Room re-write process, with guest professional writers.

Workshop: **Show A**

Table read and room re-write selected scenes.

Assignment: Show B - continue to re-write full script.
Show A - week off. (Told ya.)

Week 14

Continue Writing Room re-write process, with guest professional writers.

Workshop: Show B

Table read and room re-write selected scenes.

Week 15

Review concepts covered over the course of the semester.

Final questions and closing remarks.

GRADING

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

A	100% to 94%	C	76% to 73%
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%

Attendance and participation are vital to our room. Your fellow writers depend on your showing up and sharing your thoughts on their work, not to mention the note that can turn a scene or story around. Handing in assignments in a timely, complete manner is a routine every writer needs to get used to. In an ever-changing creative landscape your professionalism is one thing you can always depend on. Grading will reflect your effort.

Participation --- 10%

Story pitches --- 5%

Beat Sheet - 10 %

Story outline --- 10%

First Draft Part 1 --- 15%

First Draft Part 2 --- 15%

Final Draft --- 35%

The Final Draft will be assessed for the following qualities --- Does it realize the promise of the story outline?

Are the voices of the characters true to the original series?

Is the script correct in structure and format? Were notes addressed appropriately?

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 professor and provide documentation at the next attended class session.

Please note that if you are 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.

Be pro-active. Communication is important — If you have an emergency and must miss class please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE:

Lively discussion and participation are encouraged, but please be courteous and respectful. No food or drink will be allowed in the class, with the exception of water in a clear plastic container.

LAPTOP POLICY: Laptops, a vital writing tool, are encouraged in class. Cruising the Internet and instant messaging are not. This writer's room is an "all for one and one for all" atmosphere. To turn your attention to anything but the work at hand is disrespectful, not to mention un-professional. A warning will be given for the first such infraction. The next will result in a loss of one grade. Needless to say the same rule applies to cell phones.

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. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>.

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/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety of the 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.

PLEASE NOTE: FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX