

SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS WRITING DIVISION  
CTWR 434: WRITING THE HALF-HOUR COMEDY SERIES  
2 UNITS  
SECTION 19409R  
FALL 2016  
THURSDAY 10 AM-12:50 PM  
INSTRUCTOR: Linda Teverbaugh  
CLASS LOCATION: SCB 207  
USC EMAIL: [teverbau@usc.edu](mailto:teverbau@usc.edu)  
OFFICE HOURS: After class, by appointment  
Prerequisite: CTWR 321 or CTWR 514A or CTWR 529

**COURSE GOALS:**

- To survey and discuss various half-hour TV comedy genres.
- To learn why conflict equals comedy and how to use it successfully in storytelling.
- To choose and pitch a story for a spec episode.
- To prepare a strong beat sheet and outline.
- To write an effective first draft.
- To analyze and critique working drafts.
- To rewrite and polish drafts to a professional level.
- To create the atmosphere of a professional writers' room.
- To experience giving and taking notes in a safe, respectful environment where everyone's participation is encouraged and required.

**COURSE OBJECTIVE:**

The goal is to gain a practical understanding of how to write a half-hour comedy spec script. Students will go through a step-by-step, week-to-week process leading to a

polished spec script that will serve as the final for the course and as a writing sample for seeking work in the industry.

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

This course is an introduction and guide to writing a half-hour comedy script of an existing series. We'll start with an overview of the TV comedy-writing process and talk about the role of the spec in today's marketplace. We'll discuss the process of finding stories, both inside and outside personal experience; moving past creative blocks, and the importance of story structure. We'll talk at length about theme, log lines, beat sheets, outlines, rough first drafts, the invaluable process of rewriting, pitching and punch-ups.

### **SPEC OPTIONS:**

- **MOM** - A traditional multi-camera female buddy comedy
- **BLACKISH** - A single-camera family comedy
- **RICK & MORTY** - a subversive animated sci-fi/fantasy comedy
- **UNBREAKABLE KIMMY SCHMIDT** - a quirky single-camera, star-driven comedy

Students will pitch two story ideas for their spec to be analyzed and enhanced by their classmates. Each student is responsible for familiarizing himself or herself with *all* of the series on the Spec Options list (because everyone is expected to participate in workshopping each script), and each student is responsible for becoming an expert on the show he or she has chosen to spec.

(Please Note: Students will be either emailing weekly assignments to the instructor and classmates or posting weekly assignments to Google Drive. Everyone is expected to read their classmates' work and to provide informed, thoughtful, useful notes on the writing of their peers.)

We'll talk about the differences between writing for single-camera and multi-camera shows, considerations that include types of stories, characters, voice and tone. We'll also discuss how each type of show uses A stories, B stories, C stories and runners.

(Please Note: The instructor is a stickler for professionalism. It is the one quality that will sustain a writer's career. Trends come and go, writers are hot and then they're not. But the ability to stay on schedule, turn in work when it's due, and knowing how incorporate notes will make your reputation as a writer who can be trusted to get the job done!)

Be sure to read the section on Laptop Policy below! Along the way, we'll talk about the role of agents and managers, the pros and cons of having a writing partner, how to pull

good story lines from personal life experience, the importance of a great first scene, and how to survive (and even thrive) in a professional writers' room.

### **COURSE READING:**

Students will mostly be reading and noting their peers' work. All other reading will be provided by the instructor. No book purchase is required.

### **GRADING CRITERIA:**

Grading will reflect your effort. As previously noted, students are expected to either email their work to the instructor and classmates or post it to Google Drive. Everyone is expected to read their classmates' work and to provide informed, thoughtful, useful notes..

On-time attendance, class participation and handing in assignments in a timely, complete manner are mandatory for the workshop process. Your fellow writers depend upon your showing up and sharing your thoughts on their work, not to mention the note that can turn a scene or story around. In an ever-changing creative landscape, personal professionalism is one thing a writer can always depend on.

Grading will be based on:

Participation - 10%

Pitches - 5%

Log Lines/Beat Sheets - 10%

Story Outlines - 10%

First Draft of Act One - 15%

First Draft of Act Two - 15%

First Draft of Act Three and/or Tag - 15%

Final Draft - 20%

### **THE FINAL DRAFT:**

The final draft, which must be submitted in appropriate format, will be accessed for the following qualities: Does it fulfill the promise of the logline and outline? Are the voices

of the characters true to the original series? Is the draft correct in structure and form? Has it been proofed carefully? Were notes addressed appropriately?

Please note that while the grade for participation is limited to only 10 percent in this class, participation counts for much more in a professional writers' room. If you want to be a professional comedy writer, please participate fully!

**Per Writing Division policy, the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:**

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

#### **EXPECTATION OF PROFESSIONALISM:**

All material is expected to be turned in on time and in the proper format. Assignments will be penalized for grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, format mistakes, and typos. Please proof your assignment prior to submission..

#### **CLASS SCHEDULE:**

**(Please Note: Syllabus and schedule are subject to change at the discretion of the instructor. All written assignments must be either emailed or posted to Google Drive by 6 pm on the Monday before the next class meeting.)**

#### **AUG. 25, 2016 -- WEEK ONE**

- 1. Introduction and review of syllabus, class schedule and deadlines.**
- 2. Storytelling in the half-hour format -- A, B, C plots and runners -- plus a brief discussion of the evolution of the sitcom form.**
- 3. Discussion of the shows students may choose to spec and the subgenres they represent: the family comedy, the workplace comedy, the ensemble comedy, the star vehicle, etc.**
- 4. Screening of an episode TBA.**

#### **ASSIGNMENT:**

- Email a paragraph about yourself, your professional goals and the sitcoms you like and *why* to [teverbau@usc.edu](mailto:teverbau@usc.edu).
- Read and/or watch the pilots of the shows on the Spec Options list.
- Choose one of the Spec Options and come up with two different ideas for your spec. For each of your two story areas, be prepared to pitch a beginning, middle and end of the A story.

Grading Note: Pitches count for 5% of your total grade. Prepare yourself to participate each week by reading your colleagues' work and contributing feedback and creative notes (aka workshopping) to earn maximum credit for participation. Your participation every week in class is worth 10% of your total grade.

## **SEP. 1, 2016 -- WEEK TWO**

1. Creating a story from personal experience. Finding stories that resonate. Why great sitcom stories come from character rather than plot, and why conflict is comedy.
2. Discussion of structure.
3. In-class pitching of story ideas.
4. The value of the log line.

### **ASSIGNMENT:**

- Revise and expand pitch.
- Write a log line for your episode.
- Reverse-engineer an episode of the series you've chosen. Watch the episode and write down the beats, or story moves, indicating act breaks.

Grading Note: Pitches count for 5% of your total grade. Prepare to participate each week in workshopping to earn maximum credit for participation.

## **Sept. 8, 2016 -- WEEK THREE**

1. More in-class pitching (if needed) and discussion of log lines.
2. The elements of a beat sheet.
3. Why outside characters must affect the main character.
4. Thinking about theme. What's this really about?

### **ASSIGNMENT:**

- Prepare a LOG LINE and BEAT SHEET for your episode (example provided)
- Read Chapters 7 and 8 in THE TV WRITER'S WORKBOOK (provided).
- Read the beat sheets submitted by your classmates and be prepared to pitch on them.

Grading Note: Log lines and Beat Sheets count for 10% of your total grade. Prepare to participate each week in workshopping to earn maximum credit for participation.

**Sept. 15, 2016 -- WEEK FOUR**

1. Discussion of beat sheets. Are we all building toward strong Act Breaks?  
And by the way, why does MOM only have two acts?
2. The role of the outline: Adding jokes, bits of dialogue, etc.
3. **BREAK INTO A AND B GROUPS FOR WORKSHOPPING.**

**\*\*Important: Sign up for an individual story conference with instructor!\*\***

**ASSIGNMENT:**

- **GROUP A and GROUP B -- Outline your episode (example provided).**
- **Read your classmates' outlines. Be prepared to give notes: Who's ready to start writing?**

Grading Note: Outlines count for 10% of your total grade. Prepare to participate each week in workshoppping to earn maximum credit for participation.

**Sept. 22, 2016 -- WEEK FIVE**

1. The importance of the first 5-10 pages. Even if your single-camera spec is 35 pages or your multi-camera spec is 42 pages, you're lucky if the reader gets past Page 10.
2. Building toward a satisfying ending. Why it's got to be the main character who resolves the story.
3. **GROUP A -- Workshop discussion of OUTLINES.**

**ASSIGNMENT:**

- **GROUP A: Focus, refine and simplify your outlines. Begin writing FIRST DRAFT OF FIRST ACT.**
- **GROUP B: Prepare OUTLINES for workshoppping.**
- **Both groups read Chapter 13 in THE TV WRITER'S WORKBOOK (provided).**

Grading Note: Outlines count for 10% of your total grade. First drafts of Act One are worth 15% of your total grade. Prepare to participate each week in workshoppping to earn maximum credit for participation.

**Sept. 29, 2016 -- WEEK SIX**

1. Why we spend so much time getting the story right when all we want is to rush into the first draft. **"CAN THIS STORY BE TOLD ON ANY OTHER SHOW?"**
2. **GROUP B -- Workshop discussion of OUTLINES.**
3. **Possibly screen an episode TBA to analyze structure.**

**ASSIGNMENT:**

- **GROUP B: Focus, refine and simplify your outlines. Begin writing FIRST DRAFT OF FIRST ACT. *SEE NOTE BELOW.***
- **GROUP A: Be ready for workshop discussion of first draft of your Act One.**

Grading Note: First drafts of Act One are worth 15% of your total grade. Prepare to participate each week in workshopping to earn maximum credit for participation..

**Oct. 6, 2016 -- WEEK SEVEN**

1. **Writing dialogue: Hearing character voices and rhythms.**
2. **GROUP A: WORKSHOP DISCUSSION OF FIRST DRAFT OF FIRST ACT.**
3. **Possibly screen a scene from BLACKISH for great example of natural-sounding husband-and-wife dialogue.**

**ASSIGNMENT:**

- **GROUP A -- Refine/rewrite FIRST DRAFT OF FIRST ACT. Begin FIRST DRAFT OF SECOND ACT. *SEE NOTE BELOW.***
- **GROUP B -- FINISH WRITING FIRST DRAFT OF FIRST ACT.**

Grading Note: First drafts of Act One are worth 15% of your total grade. First drafts of Act Two are worth 15% of your total grade. Prepare to participate each week in workshopping to earn maximum credit for participation.

**Oct. 13, 2016 -- WEEK EIGHT**

1. **GROUP B -- WORKSHOP DISCUSSION OF FIRST DRAFT OF FIRST ACT.**

**ASSIGNMENT:**

- **GROUP B -- Refine/Rewrite FIRST DRAFT OF FIRST ACT. Begin FIRST DRAFT OF SECOND ACT**
- **GROUP A -- FINISH WRITING FIRST DRAFT OF SECOND ACT. Be prepared for workshop discussion of your second act.**
- ***SEE NOTE BELOW.***
- **BOTH GROUPS -- Read Chapter 14 of the TV WRITER'S WORKBOOK (provided).**

Grading Note: First drafts of Act Two are worth 15% of your total grade. Prepare to participate each week in workshopping to earn maximum credit for participation (10%).

**Oct. 20, 2015 -- WEEK NINE**

1. Keeping the protagonist's goals in mind, while heightening motivation and obstacles to that goal.
2. **GROUP A: WORKSHOP DISCUSSION OF FIRST DRAFT OF SECOND ACT.**

**ASSIGNMENT:**

- **GROUP A -- Refine/rewrite FIRST DRAFT OF SECOND ACT. BEGIN WRITING FIRST DRAFT OF THIRD ACT OR TAG. *SEE NOTE BELOW.***
- **GROUP B -- FINISH WRITING FIRST DRAFT OF SECOND ACT. Be prepared for workshop discussion of your second act.**

Grading Note: First drafts of Act Three and/or Tags are worth 15% of your total grade. First drafts of Act Two are worth 15% of your total grade. Prepare to participate each week in workshopping to earn maximum credit for participation.

**OCT. 27, 2016 -- WEEK TEN**

1. **GROUP B : WORKSHOP DISCUSSION OF FIRST DRAFT OF SECOND ACT.**

**ASSIGNMENT:**

- **GROUP B -- Refine/rewrite FIRST DRAFT OF SECOND ACT. BEGIN FIRST DRAFT OF THIRD ACT OR TAG.**
- **GROUP A -- FINISH WRITING FIRST DRAFT OF THIRD ACT OR TAG. Be prepared for workshop discussion of your third act and/or tag.**

Grading Note: First drafts of Act Two are worth 15% of your final grade. First drafts of Act Three and/or Tags are worth 15% of your total grade. Prepare to participate each week in workshopping to earn maximum credit for participation.

**Nov. 3, 2016 -- WEEK ELEVEN**

1. **GROUP A: WORKSHOP DISCUSSION OF THIRD ACT OR TAG.**

**ASSIGNMENT:**

- **GROUP A -- Refine/rewrite FIRST DRAFT OF THIRD ACT OR TAG. Start going back over whole script -- you're on your Final Draft.**
- **GROUP B -- FINISH WRITING FIRST DRAFT OF THIRD ACT OR TAG. Be prepared for workshop discussion of your third act and/or tag.**

Grading Note: First drafts of Act Three and/or Tags are worth 15% of your final grade, Final drafts are worth 20% of your total grade. Prepare to participate each week in workshopping to earn maximum credit for participation.

**Nov. 10, 2016 -- WEEK TWELVE**



**1. GROUP B -- WORKSHOP DISCUSSION OF FIRST DRAFT OF THIRD ACT OR TAG.**

**ASSIGNMENT:**

- **GROUP A -- FINISH REVISING WHOLE SCRIPT. You're almost done with your Final Draft.**
- **GROUP B -- REVISE THIRD ACT OR TAG. Start going back over whole script -- you're on your Final Draft.**

Grading Note: Final Drafts are worth 20% of your total grade. Read your script again: Does the story build? Does it make sense? And don't forget to proofread. Prepare to participate each week in workshopping to earn maximum credit for participation.

**Nov. 17, 2016 -- WEEK THIRTEEN**

**1. GROUP A -- WORKSHOP DISCUSSION OF FINAL DRAFTS.**

**ASSIGNMENT:**

- **GROUP B -- FINISH REVISING WHOLE SCRIPT. You're almost done with your Final Draft.**
- **GROUP A -- INCORPORATE THOSE NOTES. TAKE ONE MORE PASS.**
- **BOTH GROUPS -- MAKE SURE SCRIPT IS READY TO BE SEEN BY PROFESSIONAL COMEDY WRITERS**

Grading Note: Final Drafts are worth 20% of your total grade. Read your script again. Does your story build? Does it make sense? And don't forget to proofread. Prepare to participate each week in workshopping to earn maximum credit for participation.

**Nov. 24 -- THANKSGIVING**

**Dec. 1, 2016 -- WEEK FIFTEEN**

**1. PUNCH UP SELECTED SCENES WITH PROFESSIONAL COMEDY WRITERS**

***NOTE: IF YOU'RE WRITING A SPEC MOM, PLEASE SEE INSTRUCTOR. PAGE COUNTS AND ACT BREAKS WILL BE DIFFERENT.***

**WRITING DIVISION ATTENDANCE POLICY:**

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

equates to one full absence. In order for an 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 a Writing for Screen and Television major/minor, you must receive a grade of C or better in order to receive degree credit. If you have questions about the minimum grade required for credit, please check with your home department.

Be proactive. 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.

### **LAPTOP POLICY:**

**In the interest of making this class as much like a writers' room as possible, students are asked to print out the pages we're working with and make their notes in pencil or pen on the pages. These may be collected, so please try to write legibly. Students will verbally offer notes in class, using professional courtesy. Students in this class, as in most professional writers' rooms, are asked to put away laptops, phones, and tablets while the room is working. Keep all electronics on silent and stowed away until the break or end of class.**

As per department policy, a warning for the first offense will be followed by the loss of one grade for the second offense. If you have an emergency that requires leaving the room, please let the instructor know. If you know you're going to be absent, late or miss a deadline, please let the instructor know by advance email. Accommodations may be made at the instructor's discretion.

### **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/departments/departments-public-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](mailto: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](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