

**School of Cinematic Arts
The John Wells Division of
Writing for Screen and Television**

**CTWR 434: Writing The Half-Hour Comedy Series
Section #19440 Spring 2018**

Instructor: Sonja Warfield
Class Schedule: Tuesday 1-3:50pm
Class Location: SCA 342
Office Hours: Before class and by appointment
Contact Information: Swarfiel@usc.edu

Course Objective:

Write and re-write a spec episode of a current half hour comedy series (network,cable,internet) by the end of the semester. The completed and polished script will serve as the final for the course. It also becomes a viable sample of your work for the industry.

Course Goals:

Survey and discussion of various half hour TV comedy genres

Creating character conflict, the anchor of every successful comedy series. Conflict is comedy.

Choosing and pitching a story for a spec episode

Preparing a strong story outline

Writing an effective first draft

Analysis and critique of working drafts

Re-writing and polishing the draft to a professional level

Creating the professional atmosphere of comedy writing room.

Course Description

An introduction and guide to crafting a half hour comedy script for industry.

Course Reading

The TV Writer's Handbook by Ellen Sandler
Sitcom scripts (to be determined.)

Sitcoms We Will Choose To Write

To be determined by the class on the first day. No animation. We'll choose from shows like: *Atlanta*, *Blackish*, *Broad City*, *Grace and Frankie*

Grading Criteria:

On-time attendance, class participation and handing in assignment in a timely, complete manner are mandatory for the workshop process. In an ever-changing creative landscape, personal professionalism is one thing a writer can always depend on.

Participation:	10%
Pitch:	10%
Outline:	25%
First Act:	15%
Second Act:	15%
Final Draft:	25%

	100%

The final draft will be assessed for the following qualities...

1. Does it realize the promise of the Story Outline?
2. Are the voices of the characters true to the original series?
3. Is the draft correct in structure and form?

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%

ALL ASSIGNMENTS ARE DUE SUNDAYS @ 5pm via email. We will set up a Google Drive.

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.

Internet Policy:

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the internet.

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:

EXPLAIN YOUR POLICY ON LAPTOPS AND CELL PHONES.

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 5%. Your grade will be lowered by 5% for every absence after. Two late arrivals equates 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 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 professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

Class Schedule:

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

Class Schedule and Assignments**WEEK 1: OVERVIEW**

An introduction to the course and you.

What have been your influences in comedy.

What are your feelings about television comedy.

The value of a spec script. Why you want to be read and what readers look for.

Crafting a draft from outline to polished script.

Story V. Character. What is a "voice." How specific shows tell specific types of story.

Writing an artful story for an industry with rigid requirements.

The do's and don't of pitching. Why an idea is not a pitch.

ASSIGNMENT: Read assigned sit-com script.

Arc the main conflict for the characters and why it works for who they are.

Come up with two (2) separate ideas for your spec episode.

WEEK 2: THE PITCH

Discuss the main conflict and resolution of the assigned script.

Create a story from personal experience. How a story explains a character. Why the best stories are all about character and not about story.

Real conflict and why it's so important.

Romantic comedies.

Notes – how to give 'em. How to take 'em.

In class pitching of spec ideas.

ASSIGNMENT: Rewrite and expand the pitch.

Read a sample of the episode you've chosen.
 Read chapters 3 & 4 in *TV Writer's Handbook*

WEEK 3: WORKING THE STORY

How different shows tell different stories.
 The ensemble/ workplace comedy.
 Continuation of the pitch process. Restructuring stories.
 Discuss B and C stories
 Introduction of the Beat Sheet.

ASSIGNMENT: Prepare beat sheet of your story. (Example provided)
 Read chapters 7 & 8 in *TV Writer's Handbook*

WEEK 4: STORY TIME

Family comedies and audience identification
 What an "Act" needs to accomplish to be an Act.
 Following the story to a clear, satisfying ending.
 Pitch B and C stories
 Explanation of an outline. Adding jokes, dialogue, etc.
 Workshop of Beat Sheets

ASSIGNMENT: Write outline of your script.

(NOTE: Each student will make an individual appointment with the instructor to discuss their story.)

WEEK 5: THE OUTLINE

Outlines due.
 Discussion and review of story outlines.
 Hearing characters voices and rhythms.
 If in doubt, what's the reality?
 The beauty and elegance of the bad draft.

ASSIGNMENT: Refine and polish outlines.
 Read Chapter 13 in *TV Writer's Handbook*

WEEK 6: "BUCKLE UP, WE START WRITING"

General notes on outlines from instructor.
 Group work on outlines.
 Assign A and B groups

ASSIGNMENT: Write Act 1 of script.

WEEK 7: CHARACTERS

Avoiding clichés in story and jokes.
 Presentation matters. Format and English.
 Class review and reading of Act 1 work (Group A)

ASSIGNMENT: Refine Act 1.
 Begin Act 2

WEEK 8: BUILDING A RESOLUTION

Coming up with the *earned* ending. Examples and discussion of why you never forget some shows and instantly forget others. (Hint, it's all about the characters.)

Class review and reading of Act 1 (Group B)

ASSIGNMENT: Refine Act 1. Begin Act 2 (Group B)

Begin Act 3 (Group A)

Read Chapter 14 of *TV Writer's Handbook*

WEEK 9: WRITING IS RE-WRITING

Re-writing in comedy. Heightening motivation.

Adding obstacles to the protagonist's want. Punching up jokes.

Continue review of drafts. (Group A)

ASSIGNMENT: Complete Second draft of episode (Group A)

WEEK 10: WHAT STAYS. WHAT GOES

Pace, rhythm and tone.

Compare current series first drafts to the AS BROADCAST draft.

Continue class review of second drafts. Review draft of (Group B)

ASSIGNMENT: Complete second draft of episode (Group B)

WEEKS 11 – 13: THE ROOM

The rules (they're more like guidelines) of the writer's room. Written and unwritten.

Room re-writing on second drafts.

ASSIGNMENT: Polish Second Draft (Both Groups)

WEEK 14: HOW IT'S DONE

An in class re-writing session with a professional comedy producer/writers.

ASSIGNMENT: One solid idea for you next spec script. (Both Groups)

WEEK 15: FINALS WEEK – THE BUSSINESS PART

Outlets for getting read and being seen.

Finding an agent.

Freelance script assignments.

Getting on a show and working your way up.

The writing staff, jobs, titles, responsibilities.

FINAL ASSIGNMENT DUE: Turn in completed script. DATE TBD.

Please note - dates and subjects can change at the discretion of the instructor.

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 Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards”

<https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/>. 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>.

Support Systems:

Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>

Sexual Assault Resource Center

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: <http://sarc.usc.edu/>

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://equity.usc.edu/>

Bias Assessment Response and Support

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>

The Office of Disability Services and Programs

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. <http://dsp.usc.edu>

Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>

Diversity at USC

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. <https://diversity.usc.edu/>

USC Emergency Information

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, <http://emergency.usc.edu>

USC Department of Public Safety – 213-740-4321 (UPC) and 323-442-1000 (HSC) for 24-hour emergency assistance or to report a crime.

Provides overall safety to USC community. <http://dps.usc.edu>

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