WRITING THE SITCOM PILOT
CTWR 437
Section 19226D
School of Cinematic Arts
Pre-Reqs: CTWR 434

Instructor: RUSS WOODY
Class Schedule: Monday Morning 10:00 – 12:50 pm
Class Location: SCB 101
Office Hours: **Weekdays** 7:00-8:00 pm
                                By Phone 818-448-2773
                       Weekends 4:00-6:00 pm
                                At Aroma Café
                                4630 Tujunga Avenue/Studio City
                                (Call ahead of time.)

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Though the popularity of the network sitcom may ebb and flow, as it has done in the past – it remains the backbone of comercial television and, consequently, the myriad forms of emerging comedies on cable and the Internet. While these venues are changing, the key to creating a successful comedy series (in almost any form) has not. A strong pilot episode with well-defined characters embroiled in interesting conflicts is key to setting a successful trajectory for any series.

COURSE DESCRIPTION
Since most "future" television writers and writers (in general) will probably need to spend a few years, after finishing school, working a day job and writing on spec in their "free time," a large part of the course will be directing students to cultivate a lifetime philosphy and strategy that will enable them to push through a "writing life." That is, establishing patterns in daily activities that will be conducive to creating scripts and/or manuscripts on a regular basis.

A larger part of the class will deal with the nuts and bolts of writing, big emphasis on structure (the beat sheet), grammar, the need to be aware of show business's political realities and the ability to pace oneself in order to meet the demands of writing deadlines.

COURSE READING:
Each week one student will report on a relevant writing or show business subject, refering to magazine and/or newspaper articles. The reader and the other students will then discuss the various aspects of that article as it pertains to pilot

writing and writing in general. The goal here is to develop personal theories and strategems for the pursuit *not* just of a particular assignment, but for an overall philosophical approach to writing as a career.

GRADING CRITERION

Grades will be determined largely by a student's (for wont of a better word) pluck. The ability to adjust to notes given, the willingness to jump in and rewrite something that has been rewritten 20 times already, to discard significant sections of a script that no longer "work" … and the drive to keep pushing, to learn and to improve.

As well, deadlines are a reality, especially in television. Although the scripts being written for this class will be done on speculation (where there is usually no deadline), students will be expected to hand in outlines and drafts in the timeframe given.

Participation:	10%
Pitch:	10%
Beat Sheet:	10%
Outline:	10%
First Draft:	30%
Second Draft:	30%

	100%

As per Writing Division policy (or thereabouts) 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 10%
		F-	10% to Brain Death

Writing Division Attendance Policy:

Students are expected 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 equates 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 if 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 medically trained personel to retrieve.

Digital Information Loss Policy:
Students are expected to back up all of their writing on a *cloud service* OR *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 and that student's inability to grasp even the simplest of life's realities.

Course Goals:
Explore and analyze classic sitcom pilots—with a huge emphasis on structure, purpose, venue, character and drive. As well, we will look at failed pilots with an emphasis on why they sucked.

The importance of developing unique situations (comedic) that will display the full series potential.

Develop skills at analyzing and critiquing other people's work, with an emphasis on the work's potential and possible solutions, rather than instilling a desire in the critiqued writer to reroute their car's exhaust to the cabin.

The cultivation of self-motivation—vital in the lonely world of writing on spec—and the willingness to roll up one's sleeves (unless the student is wearing a

sleeveless shirt) and rewrite yet again and again. Writing is rewriting. And rewriting is rewriting. So is rewriting. (All of which should be rewritten.)
Realize the importance of fluidity (yes, compromise) in a professional rewrite room. The more experience a writer has in this arena, the more comfortable the writer becomes with finding new directions and, ultimately, better ideas.

General Class Schedule:
(SPECIFIC CLASS SCHEDULE will be on Blackboard after the first class. Please note that any specific dates are subject to change at the discretion and drinking schedule of the professor.)

The class will be divided into THREE GROUPS (decided in the first class), so that the schedule for handing in assignments and reviewing them can be staggered.

Each group will then:

- PITCH their ideas to the class, and make a decision about which pitch to pursue. Each student will then have one week to draw up a BEAT SHEET.

- Students will present their BEAT SHEET to the class for scrutiny and notes. They will then have one week to hand in an OUTLINE.

- The following week, they will receive notes on their OUTLINE. Then they will have two weeks to write the FIRST DRAFT of their script.

- The following week, notes will be given by the instructor and students on the FIRST DRAFT of the script. The student will then have one week to write the SECOND DRAFT.

- The following week, notes will be given on the SECOND DRAFT. Students will then have one week to write a one-page description of the SERIES ARC.

- If any student wishes to pursue the script beyond its second draft, I am always available for a meeting at Aroma Café.

Week 1: What's special about writing a pilot episode?

Week 2: Finding the right venue for a series.

Week 3: The Beat Sheet—structure, structure!

Week 4: The Vomit Draft—vital to getting it started.

Week 5: Motivating yourself to get it done—overcoming blocks.

Week 6: What makes a great comedic character?

Week 7: Learn from the greats—"study" comedy, look *outside* the sitcom world.

Week 8: A strong emotional story—take your reader on an emotional journey.

Week 9: Getting notes, rolling with the room.

Week 10: Rewriting, losing the dead weight in a script—"killing your babies."

Week 11: The joke—a natural set up is primary, *then* twist it.

Week 12: Making sure the script's ending is strong.

Week 13: Working in, and running a rewrite room.

Week 14: Polishing—knowing when your work is ready for an agent to read.

Week 15: Agents—is it fair to consider them human?

Finals Week: Everything had better be handed in by then or you will be beaten and bloodied about the head.

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. (Though, interesting to note, the instructor lifted this entire paragraph from a sample syllabus handed out by the Writing Division administration.)

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 http://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, and it's just goddamn annoying. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem. That student may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action, and could very well end up of the professor's perenial shitlist.