

COMEDY WRITING GENRES

CTWR 534
SECTION 19253D
FALL 2016

Instructor: Russ Woody
Class Schedule: Wednesdays, 4 PM – 6:50 PM
Class Location: Rm. SCA 361
Office Hours: 4 PM till 6 PM (Weekdays, except Wednesday)
Office Location: AROMA CAFÉ
4360 Tujunga Ave.
Studio City
Contact Information: (email) russwoody@aol.com
(cell) 818-448-2773

Course Objective:

Garnering an approach and practical understanding of writing spec scripts for the half-hour sitcom. The completed script you write will serve as the final for the course, as well as a possible sample of your work in the industry.

Course Description:

The course itself will follow the basic steps used in putting together a half-hour spec script. We'll start with an overview of the sitcom writing process, room protocol and general dos and don'ts in the industry. During this time we'll also be discussing the story-discovering process: how to get past blocks, how to stimulate the creative process, where to find stories both inside and outside of your own experiences. We'll also discuss structuring the story and the advantage of using a beat sheet for perspective, and digging for the heart of the story and then how to build it.

You'll have two sitcoms from which to choose (for your spec script):

ONE WILL BE A MULTI-CAMERA SHOW
THE OTHER WILL BE A SINGLE-CAMERA SHOW

We'll also discuss the difference between writing for a single-camera show vs. a multiple-camera show. This discussion promises to be quite spirited, as we'll explore the many exhilarating facets of script length and line-spacing. Fist fights often break out. As well, we'll look at each of these sitcoms and discuss the type of stories used, their use of sets, the distinguishing characteristics of the characters, the show's use of A-stories, B-stories and C-stories.

Naturally the next step is the pitch. This part of the course involves choosing from the best of your story ideas and honing them into something pitch-able. The

actual pitch itself – for many writers the most horrifying part of writing – will be done with the rest of the class, where you’ll learn to both give constructive notes and take them without contemplating suicide.

Once you have decided upon a particular story, we will again take a look at structure in more detail, since you’ll have something to apply it to. (There will be, btw, great emphasis placed on STRUCTURE in this course, so prepare yourself emotionally – if you have a particular disdain for the words “beat” and “sheet”... this class will be a nightmare for you.)

Outlining from your beat sheet will be done within the week after your pitch. When outlines are handed in, you’ll need to read other outlines so that you can give thoughtful/constructive notes during the next class. You’ll also have to endure thoughtful/constructive notes from the other thoughtful/constructive students in the class. As well, we’ll explore what to do – how to deal with – notes you may receive that make no goddamn sense.

You will be given two weeks to write the first draft of your script. During that time – and probably prior – we’ll discuss pushing from one end of the script to the other and the value of the “vomit draft” (very important). Midway through the first draft, you’ll be asked to hold up the pages of your vomit draft for display, so that others can ruthlessly criticize your penmanship. Class discussions might include the pervasive pain and self-doubt of the writer and the extraordinary allure of mundane housework during the writing process.

Once your first draft is handed in, it will be read and evaluated by other class members, who will give thoughtful/constructive notes *again*. As you will do for them and their scripts. If it hasn’t happened before this point, there will probably be a discussion of agents: how to find one, what to look for, what to expect, the “tacit agreement” and whether agents are actually similar to human beings. There will be one more draft of your script before the polished draft. The second draft will be considered the most important and will count for 30% of your grade, while the Final Teleplay will be worth 5% (the hard work has already been done). At the conclusion of the course, you are free to continue rewriting it well into the next millennium.

Grading Criteria:

| | |
|-----------------|-----|
| Participation: | 10% |
| Pitch: | 20% |
| Outline: | 20% |
| First Draft: | 15% |
| Second Draft: | 30% |
| Final Teleplay: | 5% |

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% |
| | | F- | 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 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 a medically trained expert to retrieve.

Digital Information Loss Policy:

Students are expected to back up all of their writing on a *cloud service* AND a *flash drive*. Seriously. A crashed computer or loss of a file is not an excuse, but rather a testament to a student’s disconcerting lack of mental acuity to grasp even the simplest of life’s realities. Dogs cannot eat clouds.

The Text Book

The book you may refer to is: “The TV Writer’s Workbook” by Ellen Sandler. Though there will be no specific assignments from this book, it is to your advantage to have read it. Within the Class Schedule (below) you’ll see suggestions for chapters to read – but as the class proceeds, things often change. You will, however, be required to do a report on a specific area of show business and/or writing that most inspires you or that you most aspire to. This will be something like a book report, but can come from magazine articles or any general research you wish to contribute.

Class Schedule:

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

Week 1: OVERVIEW

Introduction – your goals and feelings about comedy
 General step-by-step of the process involved in spec scripts and writing
 Industry dos and don’ts
 View DVD with a discussion of purpose and structure
ASSIGNMENT:

Read an available sitcom script

Week 2: OVERVIEW

Finding stories – sparking the creative process
 There’s no time for “writer’s block” in television
 Putting a story together – this will be a whiteboard experience
 Rolling with the room – an essential part of television writing
 Preparing for the pitch
ASSIGNMENT: Prepare your pitch for following week

Week 3: THE PITCH

Students will pitch their stories
 Restructuring stories – the Beat Sheet (all important)
 Discussion of B and C stories
ASSIGNMENT: Prepare Beat Sheet from pitch and possible B/C stories
 Read Chapters 7-8

Week 4: THE PITCH

Group will discuss any problem areas in stories
 Students will pitch and work on B/C stories
 Integrating A, B and C stories in the Beat Sheet
 Explanation of the outline – adding jokes and dialogue, etc.
 Pay attention to English
ASSIGNMENT: Write outline

Week 5: THE OUTLINE

Outlines due
 Lecture on preparing the brain for writing

Reading reading reading – the Shakespeare theory
 Hearing the rhythm of a show
 Learning to “be with” the work
 First – find the reality of the moment
 Pushing through to the end
 Be loose – the value of the vomit draft
 Writing vertically *and* horizontally
 ASSIGNMENT: Read Chapter 13

Week 6: THE OUTLINE

General notes from instructor on outlines
 Group-work on outlines
 Address any restructuring – possible beat sheet work
 ASSIGNMENT: Write a vomit draft of script

Week 7: THE FIRST DRAFT

Vomit drafts should be finished, but not acknowledged
 Discussion of problems encountered
 Lecture on Writing for the enemy
 Looking at jokes – learning from others
 Pay attention to English again
 ASSIGNMENT: On to the real First Draft

Week 8: THE FIRST DRAFT

Completed First Drafts are due
 Writing is re-writing or what’s been re-written from the rewrite
 What can be misread, will be misread
 Getting away from your work – the value a fresh look
 ASSIGNMENT: Prepare notes on other First Drafts

Week 9: THE FIRST DRAFT

Notes on First Drafts will be given and gotten
 Killing your children – learning to let go
 Possible restructuring of problematic stories
 ASSIGNMENT: Address any notes given

Week 10: THE FIRST DRAFT

Notes on any remaining First Drafts
 Discussion of problem areas
 Possible restructuring issues
 ASSIGNMENT: Start Second Draft

Week 11: THE SECOND DRAFT

Moving this from here to there
 Dealing with notes that suck
 In the zone – that glassy look when talking to friends
 ASSIGNMENT: Keep writing
 Read Chapter 14

Week 12: THE SECOND DRAFT

Completed Second Drafts due
 Discussing of the process – things discovered
 Reworking jokes – nailing it down
 The value of coming around again
 ASSIGNMENT: Prepare notes on Second Drafts

Week 13: THE SECOND DRAFT

Notes on second drafts
 ASSIGNMENT: Address notes for the Finished Draft

Week 14: POLISHING THE SCRIPT

Hand in Finished Drafts
 How the pros do it
 A re-write room session with two professional comedy writer/producers
 ASSIGNMENT: One solid idea for the next spec script

Week 15: THE BUSINESS

Next script ideas presented/discussed
 Agents and their assistants – a discussion
 Freelancing script assignments – how those work
 Working your way onto a writing staff
 The writing staff, jobs and titles
 ASSIGNMENT: Kick back, dude

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. 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.

Statement for Students with Disabilities

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Website and contact information for DSP: http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html, (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 740-6948 (TDD only), (213) 740-8216 (FAX) ability@usc.edu.

Statement on Academic Integrity

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. *SCampus*, the Student Guidebook, (www.usc.edu/scampus or <http://scampus.usc.edu>) contains the University Student Conduct Code (see University Governance, Section 11.00), while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A.

Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at: <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/>. Information on intellectual property at USC is available at: <http://usc.edu/academe/acsen/issues/ipr/index.html>.

Emergency Preparedness/Course Continuity in a Crisis

In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies.

Please activate your course in Blackboard with access to the course syllabus. Whether or not you use Blackboard regularly, these preparations will be crucial in an emergency. USC's Blackboard learning management system and support information is available at blackboard.usc.edu.