

INTRODUCTION TO TELEVISION WRITING
CTWR 321 - Section 19413 R
FALL 2016
Thursdays: 7:00-10:00pm SCA 363
Professor: Sonja Warfield
Office Hours: By Appointment
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Course Objective:

This class is designed for students who have a serious interest in the art and craft of writing for the one hour television drama. Students will study the general structure of an hour drama. They will understand and write scenes for both A story and B story. They will also collaborate with writing partners and ultimately the entire class in writing an episode of an hour television drama. This will serve as the final course project.

COURSE GOALS:

- Study critically acclaimed series to learn about the characters who drive them and the franchises which provide the external stories.
- Study the general structure of an hour show and capture the “voice of the show” in writing scenes and ultimately the class project.
- How to choose a spec story to write for an existing series.
- Overall development of writing skills through writing scenes.

Course Description:

There are similarities in writing for features and television. Each require a thorough understanding of character, a sense of plot, story structure and skilled use of visualization to add to the emotion, tone and mood of the unfolding drama. However, while these similarities are undeniable, there are also specific and marked differences. Unlike the film *ARGO* for example, characters in series television have conflicts which do not get resolved, in fact they drive the character and the story of the series forward. As an audience we tune in every week to watch these characters deal with ongoing struggles, conflicts and triumphs. We identify with them. We root for them. We love them and we hate them. Think of shows like *SCANDAL*. Olivia Pope’s ongoing affair with The President propels stories and the series forward. It’s a story arc that has been sustained throughout the life of the show.

Most television series involve a franchise. *HOW TO GET AWAY WITH MURDER* has a legal franchise. Some shows like *HOW TO GET AWAY WITH MURDER*, *SCANDAL* and *HOUSE OF CARDS* use the franchise as an arena in which the personal lives of the characters is played out. Some series tell a single story every week, but most tell two or three stories in one episode as well as tell some stories which extend over many episodes or an entire season like *EMPIRE* and *HOMELAND*.

Television is a collaborative experience and so is its writing. That, too, will be explored and examined over the semester.

Course Reading:

There will be a lot of reading required in this course of pilots and episodes and an outline. I recommend you read the script before you screen an episode so you can compare the version you imagine to what is filmed. All of the required reading will be emailed to you and available on Blackboard.

Suggested Reading:

WRITING THE TV DRAMA SERIES – 3rd edition By Pamela Douglas

Grading Criteria:

Attendance is mandatory because of the workshop element of this class. Three unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for the semester.

- 10% Participation in discussion
- 10% In-class assignments and reports
- 50% Individual Class assignments
- 30% Contribution to final project

Work should be submitted by email to the professor and class for review by **Tuesday at 7pm**. Please submit scene assignments to all classmates via email and all assignments to: swarbabe@gmail.com

Assignments turned in after the deadline will be deducted by one full letter grade for each 24-hours late.

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

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|----|-------------|----|------------|
| 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% |

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 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.

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:

Unless you are using your cell phone or your laptop to read an assignment or take notes, laptops should be closed and cell phones turned off. No texting, tweeting, or facebooking. If one person is found texting, tweeting, facebooking, pinteresting, instagramming or using their device for anything besides class work, then there will be no cell phones or laptops allowed for anyone in class and all note-taking will be done by hand. Please turn off your notifications on phones and computer.

Class Schedule and Assignments:

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

Assignments due by email Tuesday at 7pm.

Scenes must be written in a scriptwriting format. There are several programs available. There is a student discount for Final Draft. Not everyone has the latest versions of screenwriting software. Convert your FDX files to FDR, etc. Likewise make sure your PDF files can accept notes. It will improve your feedback.

When we get to longer scene work, it will be beneficial for the readers to have actual scripts. For the final table reads hard copies of the script are required for each class member and the professor. Please also email professor the final project.

WEEK 1

Class and instructor introduction. Introduction to the principles of writing for an episodic TV drama series. How episodic series writing differs from other kinds of screenwriting in conception, intention, characterization and structure. What is the voice of the series? What is the franchise? How are the characters constructed? What are the core issues which drive the main character and subsequently the plot? What are the key elements in the pilot which play out over the whole series. Screen the pilot of HOW TO GET AWAY WITH MURDER. How is the main character set up? What are his/her issues? What's compelling about her? What are the issues that will provide story material for the series? What is the world of the show?

Discussion: We will be studying three series this semester. Two of the shows will be chosen by the professor and the third show will be chosen by the class. (Prof. has final say.) These series will be the basis for the scenes and final assignment written for the course. They need to be hour dramas currently on the air and at least in their second season. Suggestions: Empire, The Americans, Scandal, The Affair, Orange Is The New Black and Mr. Robot.

Assignment: Read the pilot script for How To Get Away With Murder. Screen possible series candidates and come prepared to discuss and vote. Review the outline for THE GOOD WIFE pilot, which will be emailed. Watch the pilot episode of The Good Wife available on Itunes, or the Writing Office on DVD.

WEEK 2

Screen the pilot or episode of TBD. Discuss the differences between the script for How To Get Away With Murder and what ultimately went to film. Analyze for voice, character and story development. Compare and contrast the pilot screened to How To Get Away With Murder. Vote on the third series to be screened next week.

Lecture and discussion: The structure of a typical hour show (commercial, cable, premium). Discuss the four act structure. Some shows like SCANDAL have five or more acts. Review the outline for THE GOOD WIFE.

Assignment: Scripts from the three chosen series will be emailed in PDF. Read the three scripts and watch several episodes to understand their genres, capture character voices and structure. Write an original scene for one of the shows, capturing as closely as possible its voice and tone. (5%)

WEEK 3

Workshop and discuss scenes. Discuss dramatic tension in a two to three minute scene. Review script format and basics of characterization and dialogue.

Screen pilot of SERIES (TBD) – analyze for story structure of episode. Create a beat sheet. Discuss outlining.

**Assignment: Write a scene from the show you feared most. (5%)
Write an episode beat sheet from How To Get Away With Murder episode screened in class. (5%)**

WEEK 4

Workshop and discuss the scenes. How to engage and end a scene, start late, leave early, tighten dialogue and avoid exposition. Discussion of a sequence and how one scene builds and leads to another.

Screen sequences from shows like THE SOPRANOS and ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK. Review beat sheets.

Assignment: Write two scenes (from any of the chosen series) where the first scene sets up the second and in that scene there is a discovery or reversal for the main character. Keep within the voice of the character and series. (5%)

WEEK 5

Workshop and discuss scenes. Discussion of A&B storylines, C runners, ensemble storytelling in television drama. Discussion of arcing storylines and how they can progress over an entire season or series. Discuss the importance of guest characters and how they enhance the series. The importance of research in maintaining authenticity for the world of the show, story ideas and informing character. Discuss pitching stories in the room in preparation for the assignment. Screen clips from ensemble shows with multiple storylines and a great guest cast.

Assignment: Come up with a pitch for an A story and a B story from one of the series. Each story should have 6-8 beats. One of these stories can have a strong guest character. Think about how the stories balance or contrast with each other in tone or theme. (5%)

Write a one page beat sheet of these stories interwoven. Use 1-2 sentences per scene. Use an active verb in each sentence. (5%)

Note: neither assignment this week should be distributed to class as you will pitch next week. Submit this weeks assignments to professor only.

WEEK 6

Pitch story ideas. Class gives feedback and discuss. Discuss how a Writers Room works; the role of the showrunner vs the staff writer. Overview of the business of TV Writing.

Discussion: Which series will we write a full episode of? Class picks series for FINAL PROJECT. Depending upon the series chosen each student will be given an area of reasearch that he or she is to become "the expert" in. Research reports will be presented in week 8. See week 8 for details.

Assignment: Write three scenes from your pitch. Scenes 1 & 3 will be the A story. Scene 2 will be the B story. (10%)

WEEK 7

Discuss the pitching and development process for series television network vs cable and other outlets.

Class will be divided into pairs. Each team will have thirty minutes to pick one of three series, determine an A and B story and briefly pitch to class. (5%)

Assignment: Teams will meet to finalize A/B stories. Write five scenes (three from the A story; two from the B). After each team has written his/her scenes, they will exchange them and give notes to each other so that it appears that all four scenes are seamless and were written by the same person. All stages of writing and discussion should copy the professor under the title: WEEK 7 SCENES (10%)

Research Reoprts are due next week.

WEEK 8

Workshop and discuss scenes. Discuss the principles of team writing and what it was like to collaborate advantages and possible disadvantages. Working to your strengths.

Research Reports: Each student will report on their area of expertise. (up to 10 minutes) Should include handouts and/or email docs. As much original source work as possible. Interview experts. Eg: if the main character was a army veteran, speak to a Vet if possible or someone close to a veteran. What are the stories this arena can generate? (5%)

Begin Final Class Project. Class will split into two teams.

Assignment: Write up to two ideas to pitch for a possible episode. Pitches may be up to three minutes long. They should include a beginning, middle and end. If based on fact or newstory provide the source. (5%)

WEEK 9

Students pitch ideas to the class. Professor chooses showrunners and create a Writers Room. Using a whiteboard with the designated showrunner leading the room discussion use pitches to develop the concept that will be the episode that each team will write. The other showrunner will take notes on computer from the whiteboard and co-lead room discussion.

Assignment: Make notes on the concept so that during the next class we can begin to outline episode, breaking it down into scenes and acts. Showrunners meet to discuss any story issues and bring thoughts to class.

WEEK 10

Showrunners lead groups in outlining Acts One and Two on the whiteboard. Rest of the class observes, gives feedback. After break, teams work separately. (5%)

Assignment: Make notes on the first two acts and be prepared to make suggestions on Acts Three, Four and Five the following week of class.

WEEK11

Revise Acts One and Two. Outline Acts Three, Four and Five on the whiteboard and simulataneously on computer. (5%)

Assignment: Showrunners assign acts and scenes to writers so that the first two acts can be read the following class. (5%)

WEEK 12

Read and workshop Acts One and Two.

Discuss the scenes in terms of clarity and progression of story. Look for inconsistencies and repetition of information. Do the voices of the characters ring true?

Assignment: Showrunners revise Acts One and Two for single voice of show. Teams Write Acts Three, Four and Five. (5%)

WEEK 13

Read and workshop Acts Three, Four and Five. 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 worked on it.

Assignment: Showrunners revise Acts Three, and Four/Five polish episode for single voice of the show. (5%)

Assignment: Showrunners finalize the script and polish.

WEEK 14

Table read the final episode. Review concepts covered over the course of the semester. Final questions and closing remarks.

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 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/academicssupport/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.