

WRITING THE HALF-HOUR COMEDY SERIES CTWR 434

#19192

Fall 2017

Instructor: Linda Teverbaugh

Class schedule: Thursdays, 1-3:50 pm

Class Location: SCA 362

Office Hours: By appointment (Mostly Thursdays)

Course Objective:

The objective is to learn to write an episode of a current half-hour comedy. At the end of the semester, your completed, polished script will be the final for the class, as well as a writing sample for your creative portfolio.

Course Description:

This is an introduction and guide to the craft of writing a half-hour comedy script.

Course Reading:

TV Writer's Handbook by Ellen Sandler (excerpts provided) and scripts

Grading:

10% participation (*This is a big deal with me. See below!*)

10% story pitches

25% log line/story outline

15% first act

15% second act

25% final draft

A 100% to 94%; A- 93% to 90%; B+ 89% to 87%; B 86% to 83%;

C 76% to 73%; C- 72% to 70%; D+ 69% to 67%; D 66% to 63%

How Will the Final Draft Be Judged?

1. Does it realize the promise of the outline?
2. Are the voices of the characters true to the original?
3. Is the draft formatted correctly? Has it been proofread to professional standards?

Professional Standards:

In this class, your work will be held to industry standards. All material is expected to be turned in on time and in the proper format. (Final Draft is the industry standard for scriptwriting. Please make sure you have it by the time we're writing scenes.) Assignments will be penalized for grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, format mistakes, and typos. Points will be taken off if you don't spell established characters' names correctly. Please proof all your assignments!

Writing Division Attendance Policy:

Students are expected to show up on time and well prepared. 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.

For an absence to be excused, the student must email the instructor in advance, and then be able to provide documentation (such as a physician's note) at the next attended class session.

Note: Please don't make routine, non-emergency medical/dental/optometric/beauty appointments during class hours. The instructor cannot excuse such absences.

Also Note: If you're 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.

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:

Using personal laptops in class is encouraged. Cruising the Internet and or/texting while we are in session is not. A warning for the first offense will be followed by a step-down of one grade for the second offense.

Sitcoms We Will Be Writing:

To be determined on the first day of class. Students are expected to familiarize themselves with the show they're spec'ing, as well as the show their colleagues are spec'ing. For that reason, your instructor wants to limit the choice to two shows. But if there's a groundswell of support for a third show, and everyone agrees to watch and read episodes of all three series -- and know all three series well enough to give informed notes -- we'll take that into consideration. All spec choices subject to professor's okay.

Class Schedule and Assignments:

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

An introduction to the course and to you. What are your goals in comedy and/or for this class? What's your comedy background and/or writing background? What are your preferences and influences in comedy? What's currently going on in TV comedy, and what do you think about it? What's the value of a spec script? Why is the personal story so important to good episode writing? The do's and don't of pitching. What's the difference between an "idea" and a "pitch?" Screening of an episode TBD.

ASSIGNMENT: 1. Describe the want and main conflict for characters in the episode we watched in class. 3. Come up with two (2) separate pitches for your spec episode.

WEEK 2: THE PITCH

Discuss the main conflicts, obstacles and resolution of the episode we screened during the first class. Who's driving: How a sitcom story reveals character. Why the best sitcom episodes are all about character and not about story. Real conflict and why it's so important. Ellen Sandler's log line model. Notes – how to give ‘em. How to take ‘em. In-class pitching.

ASSIGNMENT: 1. Read a sample episode of the series you've chosen to spec. 2. Write a log line for the episode you read, using Ellen Sandler's model. 3. Write a log line for your own episode, using the same model. 4. Read your colleagues' work and be prepared to give notes.

WEEK 3: WORKING THE STORY

Sitcom story structure: A, B, and C story lines. Class sharing of log lines for the episodes read for homework.

Screen and reverse engineer a RICK AND MORTY episode as a group. Discuss B stories and runners. Start talking about possible B and C stories for your own specs. Introduction to the beat sheet.

ASSIGNMENT: 1. Prepare a beat sheet for your own story (example provided). 2. Read your colleagues' work and be prepared to give notes.

WEEK 4: STORY TIME

Workshop beat sheets. Screen a scene or two of a produced episode to identify beats laid out on a very simple beat sheet. What an "Act" needs to accomplish to be an Act. Following the story to a clear, satisfying ending. Pitch B and C stories for your specs. Explanation of an outline.

Assignment: 1. Write a log line for your spec. 2. Outline your episode. 3. Read your colleagues' work and be prepared to give notes.

NOTE: Before you leave class today, please make an appointment with the instructor for an outside-of-class INDIVIDUAL STORY CONFERENCE!

WEEK 5: THE OUTLINE

General notes on story outlines. Hearing characters' voices and rhythms. When in doubt, what's the reality?

ASSIGNMENT: 1. Refine and polish log lines and outlines. 2. Read your colleagues' work and be prepared to give notes.

WEEK 6: “BUCKLE UP, WE START WRITING”

Continuation of notes process on outlines. Group work on outlines.
Assign A and B groups

ASSIGNMENT: 1. Both groups -- Write Cold Open and Act 1 of script. Read your colleagues' work and be prepared to give notes.

WEEK 7: CHARACTERS

Avoiding clichés in stories and jokes.

Presentation matters: Formatting and English. Tips from professional writers and professional readers. Class review and table read of Cold Open and Act 1 work (Group A)

ASSIGNMENT: 1. Refine Cold Open/Act 1. Begin Act 2 (Group A). 2. Group B -- Prepare Cold Open/Act 1 for table read. 3. Read colleagues' work and be prepared to give notes.

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 Cold Open/Act 1 (Group B) *ASSIGNMENT:* 1. Refine Cold Open/Act 1. Begin Act 2 (Group B) Group A -- Prepare Act 2 for table read. 3. Read colleagues' work and prepare notes.

WEEK 9: WRITING IS REWRITING

Rewriting in comedy. Heightening motivation.

Adding obstacles to the protagonist's goals. Punching up jokes. Class review and reading of Group A's Act 2.

ASSIGNMENT: 1. Refine Act 2 and begin Act 3 (Group A). 2. Group B -- get Act 2 ready for table read. 3. Read and be prepared to give notes on colleagues' work.

WEEK 10: WHAT STAYS, WHAT GOES

Pace, rhythm and tone.

Table read and notes for Group B's Act 2.

ASSIGNMENT: 1. Refine Act 2 and begin Act 3 (Group B). 2. Group A -- get Act 3 and Tag ready for table read. 3. Read and be prepared to give notes on colleagues' work.

WEEKS 11: THE ROOM

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

Table read and notes on Group A's Act 3 and Tag.

ASSIGNMENT: 1. Refine Act 3 and Tag and then start working on Second Draft (Group A). 2. Group B -- get Act 3 and Tag ready for table read. 3. Read and be prepared to give notes on colleagues' work.

WEEK 12: THE ROOM (CONT'D)

Table read and notes on Group B's Act 3 and Tag. In-class rewriting.

WEEK 13: THE ROOM (CONT'D)

Room rewriting on Second Drafts.

WEEK 14: HOW IT'S DONE

In-class rewrite session with professional comedy producer/writers.

ASSIGNMENT: One solid idea for your next spec script. (Both Groups)
Come in with an elevator pitch.

WEEK 15: FINALS WEEK – THE BUSINESS PART

Elevator pitches and feedback. Getting read and being seen.
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.

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

Media:

Suggestions for scripts to read and episodes to watch will be given on a group and individual basis. Once again, it is in the best interest of the class that everyone is familiar with all the series being discussed.

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/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.

And lastly...

Some tips on succeeding in CTWR 434:

Punctuality matters. Everyone's expected to be in the room, ready to work, on time. If you are going to be late or can't make it to class for some legitimate reason, email your instructor. If you're late without an email or you stand me up for your individual story conference, I'm not going to like it.

Grammar matters. **Spelling** matters. **Punctuation** matters. There's a reason I'm so insistent on this, which I will definitely explain in class. If I see excessive typos and screw-ups, it will affect the grade of your final project. I am hoping someday you'll thank me.

Formatting matters. Everyone needs to be well-versed in Final Draft. ALL SCRIPTS must be formatted correctly. Again, there's a reason for this, which you'll hear in class (probably a few times).

Participation matters. Let me be real here: You guys make the class. The more fearless you are about speaking up and offering your insight, the better our time together will be. The best classes I've ever had are the ones where I would say, *"I think we need a stronger Act Two,"* and all of you, in a spirited and respectful way, come up with interesting fixes. This is exactly the way a good writers room works.

Deadlines matter. All assigned work must be emailed to the students and to the instructor **MONDAY at 5 PM!** This should give us all enough time to read everyone's work and be prepared to discuss the next time we meet.

PLEASE NOTE:

FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX. THIS IS NOT MY RULE, IT'S A DEPARTMENTAL THING.

Now, the best for last: **RESPECT** matters. I'm talking about respect for the comedy form, for the writing process, and for your fellow writers. This creative world we live in can be rough on the psyche. Let's have fun without fear of snark.

