

WRITING THE HALF HOUR COMEDY SERIES
CTWR 434
#19153D
Spring 2017

Instructor: F.J. Pratt

Class schedule: Mondays, 10:00am – 12:50pm

Class Location: TBD

Office Hours: One hour after class and by appointment

Course Objective

The course objective is to gain an understanding of and getting experience in, how to write an episode for a current half hour comedy series. At the end of the semester, the completed, polished script will be the final for the class as well as a viable sample of your writing.

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 script (to be determined.)

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.

It goes like this...

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

10% story pitches

25% story outline

15% first act

15% second act

25% final draft

The final draft will be accessed 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?

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%

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.

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:

The use of personal laptops in class is encouraged. Cruising the Internet and or/texting while we are in session is not. A warning for the first offence will be followed by a loss of one grade for the second offence.

Sitcoms We Will Choose To Write

To be determined by the class on the first day. We will choose two shows to spec. Most likely they will be single cam shows. Multi is dead right now. No animation. Sorry, Adult Swim nerds.

Class Schedule and Assignments

Week 1—Introduction

Class introduction; syllabus.

Introduction to the principles of writing for an episodic TV comedy series -- how sitcom writing differs from other forms of screenwriting in conception, intention, characterization and structure. Overview of the business of TV writing and the changing marketplace. Watch an episode of a 'classic' 1/2 hour comedy to discuss and 'deconstruct'.

Assignment: Read pilot episode of "Master of None" (provided). Breakdown characters and story elements.

Week 2

Screen pilot of “Master of None”.

Review and discuss the characters and differences between the content of the Mom pilot script and the final result on the screen. Discuss the characters and core relationships. “Reverse-engineer” the episode story into the story beats.

Watch episode of “Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt”. Discuss core character relationships and story structure.

Break into Writing Teams (two students per team).

Assignment: Using scripts provided as a guide, each team will write an original 2-3 minute scene for either “Master of None” or “Kimmy Schmidt”, capturing as closely as possible voice and tone.

Week 3

Workshop and discuss the chosen sitcom scenes. Discuss comedic conflict in a 2-3 minute scene and basic scene structure.

Watch episode of “Superior Donuts”. Discuss character relationships and basic story structure, including “A” and “B” stories.

Watch episode of “Broad City”. Discuss character relationships and basic story structure, including “A” and “B” stories.

Discuss criteria for choosing which shows to consider when writing a ‘spec’ episode.

Assignment: Each writing team to select a series and come up with two (2) ‘spec’ episode ideas for a current show (following the criteria discussed in class).

Week 4

Writing teams will pitch episode ideas. Examine the scope and types of stories that work best in the 1/2-hour form. Examine how story ideas can be fresh and engaging, yet still draw upon the core character relationships and conflict of the series premise.

Discussion of how show writing staffs function. Overview of writing room dynamics and the process of collaboration. Discuss the giving, and taking, of notes from classmates.

Split into two writing “staffs” (Show A and Show B) - consisting of three writing teams

(six students) each - which will work together for the remainder of the semester on the Final Project; a full spec episode of a current series. Each staff will select a series for which to write a spec, and then collaborate on every phase: Story idea, beat sheet, outline, first and second drafts.

Assignment: Each writing staff will come up with two episode ideas for their show. (Can be based on stories pitched in class, or can be totally new ideas).

Week 5

Workshop and discuss story ideas for both Shows. Break down overall story arcs on whiteboard. Discuss possible 'B' stories for each episode.

Assignment: Break down episode ideas into 'beat sheets'. (Both groups).

Everyone is to watch at least two episodes of BOTH shows. You not only must be familiar with the show you are writing, but also the show you will be giving notes on.

Week 6

Mid-Term Exam---Short answer questions about all facets of comedy television writing covered to date in class.

Screen: Episodes of series chosen for each project. Examine tone and feel (pacing, etc.) of each show.

Go over beat sheets for both shows. Break into specific scenes to form a 'rough outline'.

Assignment: Both groups to begin expanding and refining outlines, adding detail and dialogue.

Week 7

Workshop: **Show A**

Story notes on full outline. Full class will discuss, enhance, and help revise as needed. The goal: to have a solid outline at the end of class from which to begin writing the draft.

Assignment: Show A - begin writing first draft – Act 1
 Show B - week off. (Don't worry Show A, you'll get one later)

Week 8Workshop: **Show B**

Story notes on full outline. Full class will discuss, enhance, and help revise as needed. The goal: to have a solid outline at the end of class from which to begin writing the draft.

Assignment: Show B - begin writing first draft - Act 1.
Show A - continue writing first draft - Act 1.

Week 9Workshop: **Show A**

Table read and notes on first draft, Act 1. Discuss in terms of clarity and progression of story. Look for inconsistencies and repetition of information. Do the voices of the main characters ring true?

Assignment: Show A - begin writing Act 2 and Act 3.
Show B - continue writing Act 1.

Week 10

Workshop: Show B

Table read and notes on first draft, Act 1. Discuss as above.

Assignment: Show B - begin writing Acts 2 and 3.
Show A - continue writing Acts 2 and 3.

Week 11

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 had a hand in the creation.

Workshop: **Show A**

Table read and notes on first draft, Acts 2 and 3.
Assignment: Show A - begin re-write of full script.
Show B - continue writing Acts 2 and 3.

Week 12Workshop: **Show B**

Table read and notes on first draft, Acts 2 and 3.

Assignment: Show B - begin re-write of full script.
 Show A- continue re-write of full script.

Week 13

Begin Writing Room re-write process, with guest professional writers.

Workshop: **Show A**

Table read and room re-write selected scenes.

Assignment: Show B - continue to re-write full script.
 Show A - week off. (See, we haven't forgot ya!)

Week 14

Continue Writing Room re-write process, with guest professional writers.

Workshop: **Show B**

Table read and room re-write selected scenes.

Week 15

Review concepts covered over the course of the semester.
 Final questions and closing remarks!

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

Media:

Suggestions for scripts to read and DVD viewing will be given on a group and individual basis. It is in the best interest of the class that everyone is familiar with 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/departement/departement-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.

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

And lastly... F.J.'s pet peeves!

Promptness. I expect everyone to be in the room at 10am sharp! Our time together is limited... I want to torture you for the most time I can!

Grammar & Punctuation. We live in a world of spell check, so no excuses. If I see excessive grammatical screw-ups, it will affect the grade of your project. (*You can thank the nuns of Our Lady of Mercy who cursed me with this obsession!*)

Format: I expect you all to be versed in Final Draft. ALL SCRIPTS must be formatted correctly.

Class Participation: Let me be brutally honest here... you guys make the class. The more fearless you are about speaking up and offering your insight... the better our time will be together. The best classes I've ever had are the ones where I would say, "*I think we need a stronger Act II*", and all of you, in a spirited and respectful way, come up with interesting fixes.

All assigned work must be emailed to me (or Drop Box) **NO LATER THAN FRIDAY at 3PM!** This will barely give us enough time to read everyone's work and be ready to discuss at class the following day.

No Eating in class. You can bring in water... but that's it. No coffee. Fear not, we will have a break in class, where you can eat or get your high caloric caffeine drink downstairs!

Now, the best for last... Drumroll please.... RESPECT for your fellow students. This creative world we live in can be rough on our psyche. There are no dumb questions or pitches. If there were, I'd be on the Mt. Rushmore of comedy writers!