**WRITING THE ADVANCED HALF HOUR COMEDY PILOT**

**Spring 2018**

**CTWR 537**

**Section 19322D**

**Instructor: Mort Nathan**

**Class schedule: Friday, 1-3:50 PM**

**Class Location: SCA 362**

**Office Hours: By appointment**

**Contact Info:**  **MortNath@usc.edu**

**Course Objective**

The course objective is to have a completed original half hour comedy pilot accompanied by a potential narrative arc, which supports the series.

**Course Description**

There are hundreds of television channels and thousands of outlets for comedy series. Having a strong, well-crafted original half hour comedy pilot, along with the network standard spec script are the current tools of the trade.

The class will serve as a guide to the writing and re-writing of an original pilot. This will be an example not only of your unique voice but also of your understanding of situations, characters and the dynamics that are needed.

**Each week** we will try and watch a different pilot in order to study, dissect and learn how the series was able to build or how it then fell apart.

**Course Reading**

Sitcompilots (TBD)

Handouts

**Grading Criteria**

Grades will be determined by the same standard that television writers are judged if hired. Always show up on time. Always meaningfully contribute. Assignments are never late. Ever.

\*Notes are taken and re-writing is the norm.

\**A note on notes*. Learning to take notes on industry writing is an important skill. I read your scripts extremely carefully. If you do not understand or disagree with a note please set up an appointment so we can talk about it. *Ignoring notes will only put you behind in your writing.*

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%

A- 93% to 90%

B+ 89% to 87%

B 86% to 83%

B- 82% to 80%

C+ 79% to 77%

C 76% to 73%

C- 72% to 70%

D+ 69% to 67%

D 66% to 63%

D- 62% to 60%

F 59% to 0%

**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 an 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:**

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. (This excludes surfing the web and yelling out random television facts.) The rest of the time students will be expected to keep their laptops closed. No writing your scripts in class unless you are taking notes. Cell phones should be turned off, because …c’mon.

**Digital Information Loss Policy**

Students are expected to back up all of their writing on a cloud service or a flash drive. A crashed computer or loss of a file is only a valid excuse if you were born in the 60’s.

**Course Goals**

Explore and analyze classic and a few indie sitcom pilots. The class will be heavily weighted in defining structure, purpose, venue, character and conflict.

The class will also dissect what makes a unique situation and what is the dynamic that can sustain it.

Another crucial component will be developing skills to analyze and critique your work and other writers with an emphasis on always making it better and yes, while making it weird is now a seemingly TV standard, our goal is to see that it things are never weird for weird sake and that even weird needs to be grounded.

An introduction to the loneliness of the long distance pilot writer: the joys and sorrows of writing on your own, sticking to a schedule, and continuing to rewrite. To continue the education of leaving excuses and defenses behind while learning the grace and flexibility of a writers room.

**GENERAL Class Schedule:**

(Specific dates are subject to change per the discretion of the professor)

The class will be divided into GROUPS (decided in the first class) so that the schedule for handing in assignments and reviewing them won’t kill us.

**GROUPS will –**

PITCH their ideas to the class and make a decision about which idea to write. Each student will then turn in their BEAT SHEET in ONE WEEK.

Students will present their Beat Sheets to the class for notes. They will have ONE WEEK to hand in an OUTLINE.

The following week, they will receive notes on their OUTLINE. They will have TWO WEEKS to write the FIRST DRAFT of their script.

The following week, notes will be given by the instructor and the class on the FIRST DRAFT. The student will have ONE WEEK to write the SECOND DRAFT.

The following week notes will be given on the SECOND DRAFT. Students will have ONE WEEK to write a ONE PAGE ON THE SERIES ARC.

In addition to analyzing students works in progress and current TV pilots, topics for discussion will also include…

Week 1: Why do some pilots work and others don’t?

Assignment: Two potential pilot ideas and pilot stories

Week 2: What’s the best situation in a situation comedy?

Assignment: Beat sheet for pilot story

Week 3: The Beat Sheet v. Ideas

Assignment: Revised, more detailed beat sheet/outline.

Week 4: Just Do It – writing the fast draft.

Assignment: Written, formatted pilot teaser

Week 5: Motivation – tricks and tips for getting it done.

Assignment: Rewritten teaser, Act I

Week 6: Comedy is a character in trouble – Why some characters are iconic. Why some characters don’t work.

Assignment : Rewrite teaser, Act I

Week 7: All the world’s a stage – What is funny?

Assignment: Act II

Week 8: Grounding and Emotional Cores.

Rewrite Act II

Week 9: Just Breathe. (Getting and giving notes.)

Assignment: Refine and rework Teaser through Act II

Week 10: Re-writing is writing. If you think it’s funnier than it is… it isn’t.

Assignment: Act III

Week 11: The joke pass. What you don’t see coming.

Assignment: Rewrite Act III

Week 12: Series arcs and future episodes. How to approach the series “Bible.”

Assignment: Refine and rework Teaser through Act III

Week 13: Writer’s rooms and how to thrive.

Assignment: Final revisions on pilot script

Week 14: Polishing, the fine line of your voice vs others.

Assignment: Putting together the series “Bible”

Week 15: Agents, Biz Stuff. Special industry guest, pending availability

Finalize series “Bible.”

**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 Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” <https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/>.  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](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/" \t "_blank).

**Support Systems:**

*Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call*

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.<https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255*

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. [http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/)

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call*

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>

*Sexual Assault Resource Center*

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website:<http://sarc.usc.edu/>

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086*

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class.<https://equity.usc.edu/>

*Bias Assessment Response and Support*

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response.<https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs*

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. [http://dsp.usc.edu](http://dsp.usc.edu/)

*Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710*

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic.<https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>

*Diversity at USC*

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. <https://diversity.usc.edu/>

*USC Emergency Information*

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, <http://emergency.usc.edu>

*USC Department of Public Safety –* *213-740-4321 (UPC) and 323-442-1000 (HSC) for 24-hour emergency assistance or to report a crime*.

Provides overall safety to USC community. [http://dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu/)

**PLEASE NOTE:**

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

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