

**School of Cinematic Arts  
The John Wells Division of  
Writing for Screen and Television**

**WRITING THE HALF HOUR COMEDY SERIES  
CTWR 434  
#19207D  
Fall 2018**

**Instructor: F.J. Pratt**

**Class schedule: Tuesdays, 1PM – 3:50pm**

**Class Location: SCB 101**

**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 equate 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: OVERVIEW**

An introduction to the course and you.  
What have been your influences in comedy.  
What are your feelings about television comedy.  
The value of a spec script. Why you want to be read and what readers look for.  
Crafting a draft from outline to polished script.  
Story V. Character. What is a "voice." How specific shows tell specific types of story.  
Writing an artful story for an industry with rigid requirements.  
The do's and don't of pitching. Why an idea is not a pitch.

*ASSIGNMENT:* Read assigned sit-com script.

Arc the main conflict for the characters and why it works for who they are.  
Come up with two (2) separate ideas for your spec episode.

## **WEEK 2: THE PITCH**

Discuss the main conflict and resolution of the assigned script.  
Create a story from personal experience. How a story explains a character. Why the best stories are all about character and not about story.  
Real conflict and why it's so important.  
Romantic comedies.

Notes – how to give 'em. How to take 'em.

In class pitching of spec ideas.

*ASSIGNMENT:* Rewrite and expand the pitch.

Read a sample of the episode you've chosen.

## **WEEK 3: WORKING THE STORY**

How different shows tell different stories.  
The ensemble/ workplace comedy.  
Continuation of the pitch process. Restructuring stories.  
Discuss B and C stories  
Introduction of the Beat Sheet.

*ASSIGNMENT:* Prepare beat sheet of your story. (Example provided)

## **WEEK 4: STORY TIME**

Family comedies and audience identification  
What an "Act" needs to accomplish to be an Act.  
Following the story to a clear, satisfying ending.  
Pitch B and C stories  
Explanation of an outline. Adding jokes, dialogue, etc.  
Workshop of Beat Sheets

*ASSIGNMENT:* Write outline of your script.

**(NOTE:** Each student will make an individual appointment with the instructor to discuss their story.)

## **WEEK 5: THE OUTLINE**

Outlines due.  
Discussion and review of story outlines.  
Hearing characters voices and rhythms.  
If in doubt, what's the reality?  
The beauty and elegance of the bad draft.  
*ASSIGNMENT*: Refine and polish outlines.

#### **WEEK 6: "BUCKLE UP, WE START WRITING"**

General notes on outlines from instructor.  
Group work on outlines.  
Assign A and B groups  
*ASSIGNMENT*: Write Act 1 of script.

#### **WEEK 7: CHARACTERS**

Avoiding clichés in story and jokes.  
Presentation matters. Format and English.  
Class review and reading of Act 1 work (Group A)  
*ASSIGNMENT*: Refine Act 1.  
Begin Act 2

#### **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 Act 1 (Group B)  
*ASSIGNMENT*: Refine Act 1. Begin Act 2 (Group B)

#### **WEEK 9: WRITING IS RE-WRITING**

Re-writing in comedy. Heightening motivation.  
Adding obstacles to the protagonist's want. Punching up jokes.  
Continue review of drafts. (Group A)  
*ASSIGNMENT*: Complete Second draft of episode (Group A)

#### **WEEK 10: WHAT STAYS. WHAT GOES**

Pace, rhythm and tone.  
Compare current series first drafts to the AS BROADCAST draft.  
Continue class review of second drafts.  
*ASSIGNMENT*: Complete second draft of episode (Group B)

#### **WEEKS 11 – 13: THE ROOM**

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

Room re-writing on second drafts.  
**ASSIGNMENT:** Polish Second Draft (Both Groups)

#### **WEEK 14: HOW IT'S DONE**

An in class re-writing session with two professional comedy producer/writers.  
**ASSIGNMENT:** One solid idea for you next spec script. (Both Groups)

#### **WEEK 15: FINALS WEEK – THE BUSSINESS PART**

Outlets for getting read and being seen.  
Finding an agent.  
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 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/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](mailto: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](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.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>PLEASE NOTE: FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX</b></p>
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### **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!