School of Cinematic Arts
Writing Division
CTWR 439: Writing the Original Dramatic Series Pilot
Section 19351

Instructor:	Kate Powers
Class Schedule:	Thursdays, 7-10 p.m.
Class Location:	SCA 362
Office Hours:	By appointment
Contact Information:	kapowers@usc.edu

Course Objective:

To deepen students' understanding of the hour-long dramatic series, with a focus on developing a productive writing process, using character development as a story breaking tool and constructive participaton in a writers' room-type environment. From an initial written pitch and character bio, students will develop an outline and complete a full draft for an original dramatic series pilot with a teaser and four acts.

Recommended -- But Not Required -- Course Materials:

Writing the Pilot by William Rabkin (2011)
Writing the Pilot: Creating the Series by William Rabkin (2017)
Deep Work by Cal Newport (2016)
A Notebook with at least 240 pages/120 sheets, lined or not, as you prefer.

Course Description:

Once upon a time, every original drama pilot was written for either network or cable television. They were created largely under development deals, given to seasoned, senior-level writers who'd already broken forty or fifty episodes of television.

Today, the original pilot has become the essential writing sample for the aspiring TV writer -- managers want them, prestigious fellowships ask for them, and it is nearly impossible to be staffed without one (or more) in your portfolio.

Shorter than a feature, with the built-in expectation of launching a series, the original pilot is a demanding and difficult writing project -- and one of the most rewarding. From the tightly structured 6-act network procedural to the break-less premium series, the original pilot has become a chameleon, shifting and adapting to showcase voices and storytelling philosophies ranging from Jennie Snyder Urman's CW series Jane the Virgin to Liz Flahive and Carly Mensch's Netflix series Glow to Peter Gould & Vince Gilligan's Better Call Saul for AMC.

Over the next 15 weeks, we will use this course as a weekly writers' room, where we will analyze the structure of compelling pilots, brainstorm and evaluate premises, and use character bios and outlines to break story for a full-length pilot.

This syllabus -- and additional material, as appropriate -- will be available on Blackboard.

LAPTOP AND CELL PHONE POLICY:

The most effective writers' rooms restrict laptop and cellphone access to the writers' assistant -- and to a lesser degree, the showrunner -- in order to keep the staff focused on the work at hand.

As much as possible, this class will mimic the structure and ethos of a productive writers' room, the better to prepare you for eventual employment in television or other collaborative environments. Therefore, we will be adopting the same policy and relying on paper notebooks, the classroom projector and, as needed, physical documents.

Consequently, laptops and cellphones are forbidden during classtime. They should be silenced and stored out of sight. The only exception will be during discussion of your work, when you may use your phone's voice memo feature to record the conversation.

Grading Criteria:

ALL WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS should be delivered, attached to an email to kapowers@usc.edu and, if required, to the entire class by 9 p.m. on the announced deadline. Late assignments will result in the grade being lowered half a point. The email's subject line should read:

Last Name Assignment name (Pitch, Act One, etc) Draft #

ALSO: The file's name AND the header of your assignment should MATCH THIS EXACTLY.

ALL WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS should be proofread prior to delivery. Mistakes happen, but if an assignment contains more than two typos per five pages, the resulting grade will be lowered by half a point. A semester-long pattern of sloppy proofing will result in a final grade being lowered by a full point. ALL WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS are to be delivered as PDFs.

SCRIPTS should be written in Final Draft or Movie Magic Screenwriter -- we will be using Revision Mode.

Your grade is based primarily on written assignments. Your outline will serve as your mid-term exam, and your final script is your final.

You are expected to complete all reading -- from the assigned texts AND your classmates' submitted pages -- in advance of class, and to have prepared feedback. Your particiation during class -- what I call "staff ethic" -- is also important. This means not just giving and receiving notes, but listening to your classmates, contributing to the discussion and above all, helping create a safe space for this class to do its best work.

Staff Ethic:	10%
Class preparation (assigned reading, viewing and classmates' pages):	10%
Pilot Pitches	10%
Pilot Worksheet	10%
Outline:	20%
Final script (Due by 9 p.m on Sunday, December 10th):	40%
TOTAL	100%

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

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%

Class Schedule:

Please note that dates and assignments are subject to change at the discretion of the professor. Screenings will be incorporated as appropriate and time permits.

Week 1: Thursday, Aug. 23, 2018

Class and instructor introduction; review syllabus
Elements of pilot: Concept, characters, conflict, theme and franchise
The emotional core of compelling stories
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. Brainstorm THREE pilot pitches, complete with concept, characters, conflict, theme and franchise (meaning 2-3 examples of possible episode premises).
2. Select and watch an existing pilot that shares one or more elements with your favorite premise.
3. Complete the Pilot Analysis Worksheet for your selected pilot.
4. Email your worksheet and a PDF of THREE pilot pitches to kapowers@usc.edu by 9 p.m. on Monday, Aug. 27.
5. Be prepared to discuss your worksheet and to verbally pitch your pilot premises in class.

Week 2: Thursday, Aug. 30, 2018

Character and conflict as story-building tools
Discussion of pilot worksheets
Pitching of pilot premises
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. Narrow down your pilot premises to 1-2 choices, and brainstorm 3-5 storylines for each.
2. Choose a pilot premise for this course and email your choice with a PDF of 3-5 storyline pitches to kapowers@usc.edu by 9 p.m. on Tuesday, Sept. 4.
3. Be prepared to discuss your pilot and pitch storylines in class.

Week 3: Thursday, Sept. 6, 2018

Structure and tone: Beyond commercial breaks and content ratings
Discussion of story premises and storylines
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. Choose a storyline for your pilot and write a beatment; email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by 9 p.m. on Monday, Sept. 10.
2. Read beatments and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 4: Thursday, Sept. 13, 2018

The world of your Pilot - setting and supporting cast
Franchise and story ideas: What would this series look like?
Discussion of Beatments
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. Write an outline and email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by 9 p.m., Monday, September 17.
2. Read outlines and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 5: Thursday, Sept. 20, 2018

Discussion of teasers and non-submersible units as storytelling tools
Discussion of outlines
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. As needed, revise outlines and email as a PDF to instructor ONLY by 9 p.m., Sunday, Sept. 23.
2. Write a teaser (3-8 pages) and email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by 9 p.m., Monday, Sept. 24.
3. Read teasers and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 6: Thursday, Sept. 27, 2018

Workshopping pilot teasers
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. Begin writing Act One (aim for 5-8 pages) and email Teaser and Act One to instructor and classmates by 9 p.m., Monday, Oct. 1.
2. Read pages and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 7: Thursday, Oct. 4, 2018

Workshopping first acts
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. Finish drafting Act One (again, aim for 5-8 pages) and email scripts through the end of Act One (~ 15 pages total) to instructor and classmates by 9 p.m., Monday, Oct. 8.
2. Read pages and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 8: Thursday, Oct. 11, 2018

Workshopping first acts
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. Begin writing Act Two -- TURN ON REVISIONS! -- and email scripts (~ 20 script pages) to instructor and classmates by 9 p.m., Monday, Oct. 15, WITH REVISIONS MARKED.
2. Read pages and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 9: Thursday, Oct. 18, 2018

Workshopping second acts
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

3. Finish drafting Act Two -- RESET REVISIONS! -- and to email scripts through the end of Act Two (~ 25-30 script pages) to instructor and classmates by 9 p.m., Monday, Oct. 22, WITH REVISIONS MARKED.
1. Read pages and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 10: Thursday, Oct. 25, 2018

Workshopping second acts
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

4. Begin work on Act Three -- RESET REVISIONS! -- and email scripts (~ 30-35 script pages) to instructor and classmates by 9 p.m., Monday, Oct. 29, WITH REVISIONS MARKED.
5. Read pages and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 11: Thursday, Nov. 1, 2018

Workshopping third acts
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. Finish drafting Act Three -- RESET REVISIONS! -- and email scripts through the end of Act Three (~ 35-40 pages) to instructor and classmates by 9 p.m., Monday, Nov. 5, WITH REVISIONS MARKED.
2. Read pages and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 12: Thursday, Nov. 8, 2018

Workshopping third acts
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. Begin writing Act Four -- RESET REVISIONS! -- and email scripts (~ 40-45 pages) to instructor and classmates by 9 p.m., Monday, Nov. 12, WITH REVISIONS MARKED.
2. Read pages and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 13: Thursday, Nov. 15, 2018

Workshopping fourth acts
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. Finish Act Four and email scripts through the end of Act Four (~ 50-55 pages) to instructor and classmates by 9 p.m., Monday, Nov. 19, WITH REVISIONS MARKED.
2. Re-read your current drafts and email a list of 3-8 goals for your finished draft to kapowers@usc.edu by 9 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 27.
3. Read pages and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 14: Thursday, Nov. 22 THANKSGIVING - NO CLASS

Week 15: Thursday, Nov. 29, 2018

Workshopping fourth acts
Discussion of next steps and industry realities.
ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK: Polish and proofread scripts and email final draft to instructor by 9 p.m., Sunday, December 9, 2018.

Classes end: Friday, November 30, 2018

Finals Week: Wednesday, December 5 - Wednesday, December 12, 2018

FINAL DRAFT SCRIPT DUE: 9 p.m. SUNDAY, December 9, 2018

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 5%. Your grade will be lowered by 5% 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.

Names and Pronouns Policy:

As an instructor, I always want to refer to my students by their preferred name and pronouns. In this classroom, you are invited to share your chosen name and pronouns, either verbally during classtime or privately via email. In the spirit of a supportive and safe writers' room, I ask that we endeavor to refer to each other by the name and pronouns we've shared, while understanding that pronouns are not necessarily indicative of an individual's gender identity.

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.

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

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

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

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