

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

**Staff Writing the Comedic Television Series  
CTWR 487  
#19422  
Fall 2018**

**Instructor: F.J. Pratt  
Class Schedule: Wednesdays, 6:00-9:50  
Office Hours: By appointment  
Email: fjprattiv@gmail.com**

**OVERVIEW**

In a medium where new stories are required each week, writing and re-writing skills become a most valuable asset. Moreover, the vision and adaptability of the Head Writer (aka the Show runner) determines the course of any scripted series. Writing students in this course will get to experience first-hand what it is like to work as Show runners and Staff Writers on a multi-camera half-hour comedy series. While this production will be blissfully free of development types, the instructor will act as the voice of the network/buyer – ‘cause ya always gotta listen to the buyer.

**COURSE GOAL**

This experience is an incredible opportunity for writing students to get first hand experience with creating, writing and re-writing a pilot episode of an SCA created TV series, pitch further episodes, in addition to collaborating with a corresponding Production Division class (CPTR 484, Advanced Multi-Camera Television Workshop) in producing a final product.

Students will interact with other writers, producers, directors, editors, crew and yes, actors. Students must all work together to take a show from the page to the stage and into the living room. In the process of dealing with other creative types, each student will hopefully have learned the essential skill of collaboration and the humbling experience of another writer having a better joke.

**COURSE OBJECTIVE**

A pilot episode of a student-created TV series will be shot in front of a live audience on an SCA stage with DVD's of the finished product distributed at the end of the course.

**REQUIREMENTS**

Students who apply for this course are expected to have completed CTWR 434, have written a spec script for a half hour comedy series and/ won an Emmy. The course is recommended for students, both graduate and undergraduate who have a serious interest in writing comedy for television.

**ATTENDANCE**

All writing students are required to attend regular class hours from 6 p.m. to 9:50 p.m., Wednesday evenings. Most re-writing, production meetings, table readings with actors, and rehearsal run-thrus will take place during regular class hours. In addition, writing students may be required to meet with the Show Runner for occasional rewrites outside of class. All students are expected to be present on stage for two weekends during the semester when episodes are blocked and shot on camera (See course schedule). Any

students who fail to show up for classes, weekend assignments or rewrites will be considered nonexistent. This is a participation class so...you gotta.

**Students who take on Show runner (Executive Producer)** responsibilities are expected to be available for casting, additional re-write sessions as needed and post-production on their episodes.

Students with various Producer assignments (Casting, Pre-Production, Post--Production, Associate Producer) are expected to be available as needed for their individual assignments. Anyone who finds that they are unable to perform their duties should inform the instructor in due time to avoid being talked about in hushed tones at the craft service table.

Attendance is part of the real working life of production it's enormously important to get a feel for the grind of actual production. More importantly, this class is all about collaboration. If you are not present, you can't collaborate. In addition, you'll be considered absent. You'll also be considered a lot of other things if you leave your job or let down your team.

**Note:** The Instructor understands most students have multiple classes and responsibilities during the semester; so every effort is made to allow for real conflicts that arise. But don't push it.

### GRADING

Since this class is essentially a weekly writing workshop, students will be graded on their participation in the room writing process, their ability to give constructive notes as well as receive constructive criticism. They will be graded on their initiative to bring new ideas and script fixes to class and the timely completion of any and all weekly homework assignments.

### BREAKDOWN OF GRADE

Class Participation---10%

Individual assignments #1 and #2---20%

Team assignments #3 thru #7---50%

Final Review paper--Individual assignment #8--20%

Two unexcused absences automatically lower your grade one full point. Three unexcused absences will lower grade two full points, which, for grad students, sucks big time. Tardiness will be noted and two late arrivals will count as one full absence. There is important ground to cover in each session and as tardiness is looked down on in a professional writers room there's no reason to allow it here.

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"Eighty percent of success is showing up"

Woody Allen

*"Seriously."*

F.J. Pratt

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### WEEK 1 – August 22nd

Course overview. Meet with Production Class. Exec Producers will describe pilot, it's intent, mood, look, etc. Supply CAST BREAKDOWNS and copies of FIRST DRAFT. A discussion of the production of a half hour comedy series. Students choose jobs and divide responsibilities.

SCRIPT COORDINATOR – Hard Copies/Sides, etc.

PRE-PRODUCTION PRODUCER

POST-PRODUCTION PRODUCER

CASTING DIRECTORS

A discussion of protocol in the rewrite room – do's and don'ts; The highs and lows of collaborative writing. Is collaboration a four-letter word? How a writing staff is like a volleyball team. Rolling with someone else's pitch. How to object to the show runner's choice (hint: 1 1/2 times... if you feel strongly.) Letting go of your own pitches when they sink. Room re-write begins on Pilot.

*Assignment #1-* Watch the pilot for *Unbreakable*. Be ready to discuss next week.

### WEEK 2 - August 29<sup>th</sup>

A discussion of methods for finding story ideas. Find 100 ideas, five will be good. Where's your heart? What makes a great character? How's it get you a story? Rewrite script, as necessary. Visit from professional TV Production Designer on the importance of production design in comedy. Seminar with Professional Casting Director.

"I make at least a hundred decisions a day, and at least half of them are wrong. The important thing is to keep making decisions."

Peter Casey, Co-creator/Show runner, *Wings*, *Frasier*

*Assignment # 2* – Break down the characters in pilot we are working on and create at least one new conflict for with another character in the show. You can create one character that's not in the show. Be prepared to pitch it and why that character will add to the depth of the story.

### WEEK 3 – September 5<sup>th</sup>

Discussion of the importance of music and title sequence to a series. Discussion of giving and getting notes. How to receive bad notes without doling out physical violence. How to give notes without bringing a writer/actor to tears, and no, you don't want to do that. Room re-write continues on Pilot.

**\*\*\* WEEKEND ONE \*\*\* Saturday, September 8<sup>th</sup> 10AM**

Casting. Room off the stage in classroom is set up and ready. Producers prepare and organize: SCRIPT SIDES, PARKING, SCHEDULE OPEN ROOM, WATER, etc.

**Morning:** Actors and Directors. **Afternoon:** Preliminary call backs for EPs and Directors and Actors. Possible re-write of pilot script.

#### **WEEK 4 – September 12<sup>th</sup>**

6-8pm - Casting callbacks upstairs in classroom with EPs/Directors/Crew. Final casting decisions will be made. Cast run-thru of Pilot. 7pm on Stage #4 Notes with Director and cast. Re-write of Pilot.

*Assignment #3:* Pairs of students will team up. Each pair will prepare five new jokes for the re-write of Episode #2.

#### **WEEK 5 – September 19<sup>th</sup>**

Production Meeting on Stage 4. Discussion of what makes a situation funny? Start with something serious – how do you twist it? Rewrite upstairs.

#### **WEEK 6 – September 26<sup>th</sup>**

Table read on Stage 4.  
Producers must have: TABLES, SCRIPTS and CHAIRS

Upstairs – Discussion of rewriting your own material. How to look at the whole of the piece, get rid of unnecessary stuff. Re-write continues.

**\*\*\* WEEKEND TWO \*\*\* Saturday, September 29<sup>th</sup>**

**Camera Blocking with full crew. Tech run-thru.**

**\*\*\* WEEKEND TWO \*\*\* Sunday, September 30<sup>th</sup>**

**Tech-walk through, full cast. 9:00 am practice run through.**

#### **WEEK 7 – October 3**

Final camera blocking. First full rehearsal. A discussion of how to fix a script in BIG trouble. A discussion of Gang Writing an episode.

**\*\*\* WEEKEND THREE \*\*\* Sunday, October 7**

Full Cast and Crew call.

Noon – camera blocking, rehearsal

3pm – Lunch.

4pm – Audience Arrives.

5pm - Shoot in front of live audience.

#### **WEEK 8 – October 10**

Screen rough assemblage of rehearsal show. Each team will prepare a set of notes for editing. Rewrite of script as necessary.

**WEEK 9 – Wednesday, October 17**  
**Run Through on Stage for Air Show.**

**WEEK 10 – Wednesday, October 24**  
**Production meeting – full crew**  
**Table read with revisions – full cast**

**\*\*\* WEEKEND FOUR \*\*\* Saturday, October 27**

**Saturday:**

10 am: Full cast and crew call.

1-1:30 pm: Block Air Show

**\*\*\* WEEKEND FOUR \*\*\* Sunday, October 28**

**Sunday:**

12 pm: Full cast and crew (refreshing).

3 pm: Lunch.

4 pm: Audience Arrives.

5 pm: Filming.

**WEEK 11 – October 31st**  
**Screen editors cut for class on Stage 1.**

Writers will bring in their problem scripts and lead the room in a rewrite of their script. Emphasis will be on room participation, criticism and leadership.

**WEEK 12 – November 7<sup>th</sup>**

EP's give their notes to editors.

Writers will bring in their problem scripts and lead the room in a rewrite of their script. Emphasis will be on room participation, criticism and leadership.

**WEEK 13 – November 11<sup>th</sup>**

Editing and Directing Faculty give editing notes in lab.

Writers will bring in their problem scripts and lead the room in a rewrite of their script. Emphasis will be on room participation, criticism and leadership.

**November 22 - *THANKSGIVING***

Thursday. Go home. Eat.

Ply your relatives with alcohol into fights resulting in script ideas for next pilot.

**WEEK 14 - November 28<sup>th</sup>**

Screen Final Cut for Class and Cast, Mini Party, Screening Room.

## **FINALS WEEK**

Check the gates... It's a wrap.

## **RECOMMENDED READING**

*The TV Writers Workbook* by Ellen Sandler

## **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 *Campus* 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 *Campus* 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.

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