

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

CTWR 324
19309D
“Introduction to TV Comedy Writing”
Spring 2019

Instructor: F.J. Pratt
Class Schedule: Friday 1:00PM – 3:50PM
Office Hours: Fridays by appointment

Course Objective:

To write scenes for various existing TV Comedy series that demonstrate professional skill in several current comic platforms, i.e multi-camera, single camera, and comic genres, i.e. romantic, family and workplace comedies. To work on scenes with a writing partner to understand the collaborative nature of comedy writing. Taking part in the process of a Writers Room which mirrors the real world of TV Comedy. As a class, break a story and collaborate on the writing of A COMPLETE EPISODE for a current comedy. This will serve as the final course project.

Course Description:

This class is designed for students who have an interest in understanding and delving into the art and craft of writing for the half-hour television comedy. It will explore the reasons for the rules of TV writing as well as the very nature of sitcom and its evolution over the years. Television is a collaborative experience and so is its writing. That, too, will be explored and examined over the semester.

Course Goals:

- Exposure to the process of writing episodic TV Comedy
- Appreciation of outstanding comedy series writing
- How to choose a spec story from an existing comedic series
- Study of effective scenes from excellent TV scripts
- Overall development of comedy writing skills through comic scene construction

Course Theme:

Comedy is Character. Each genre of TV comedy requires a understanding of character, which leads to creating conflict, which in turn leads to story, structure, theme, and ultimately what the Pros refer to as “the funny.”

Course Readings: (All course reading will be provided in PDF format via email. No book purchase is required.)

- Selected excerpts from The TV Writer’s Handbook by Ellen Sandler.
- Various scripts for existing series.

Grading:

As per Writing Division policy the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade: It goes like this...

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%

Attendance and participation are vital to our room. Your fellow writers depend on your showing up and sharing your thoughts on their work, not to mention the note that can turn a scene or story around. Handing in assignments in a timely, complete manner is a routine every writer needs to get used to. In an ever-changing creative landscape your professionalism is one thing you can always depend on. Grading will reflect your effort.

Participation --- 10% (This is a BIG deal with me. See below!)
 Story pitches --- 5%
 Beat Sheet - 10 %
 Story outline --- 10%
 First Draft Part 1 --- 15%
 First Draft Part 2 --- 15%
 Final Draft --- 35%

The Final Draft will be assessed for the following qualities --- Does it realize the promise of the story outline? Are the voices of the characters true to the original series? Is the script correct in structure and format? Were notes addressed appropriately?

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.

Internet Policy:

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the internet.

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:

EXPLAIN YOUR POLICY ON LAPTOPS AND CELL PHONES.

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.

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

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 pilot script. Why you want to be read and what readers look for. Crafting a draft from outline to polished script.

Story vs. 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'ts of pitching. Why an idea is not a pitch.

ASSIGNMENT: Read assigned pilot sit-com script.

Arc the main conflict for your 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.

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

In class pitching of spec ideas.

ASSIGNMENT: Rewrite and expand the pitch.

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.

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

Outside guest speaker – a professional writer to come and chat about life in the real world! (Heck, I'll be doing that all during the semester, but it'll be good to hear from someone with a different perspective!)

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.

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 WEDNESDAY 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!

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**