

WRITING THE HOUR-LONG DRAMATIC SERIES
CTWR 421
SECTION 19203D

Instructor: Kate Powers
Class Schedule: Wednesdays, 1-3:50 p.m.
Class Location: SCA 362
Office Hours: Wednesdays, 4:30 – 6:30 p.m. and by appointment
Contact: kapowers@usc.edu

Course Objective

To introduce students to the process of creating a script for an hour-long dramatic series, with a focus on fostering a productive writers' room, breaking story and writing an outline and spec script for an existing hour-long drama.

Required Text

Writing the TV Drama Series, 4th Edition by Pamela Douglas

Course Description

The writers' room is a unique, sometimes terrifying, often profoundly rewarding creative environment. Over the next 15 weeks, we will be creating our own writers' room, developing a safe space where we can explore the structure of compelling, thoughtful dramas and unpack the inner lives of the characters who fuel some of the most acclaimed and addictive series.

Our first challenge is to select the two or three series we'll be tackling this semester. Some of you may be aspiring TV writers, and envision this script as a future sample. Others may want to try out a fun genre or intriguing setting -- and that's fine too.

You may have already heard the conventional wisdom that original pilots are the only viable writing samples. This is not true. A lot of industry folks will read a spec script, as long as it fits the following criteria:

- The series has been in distribution for at least a year, and isn't in danger of cancellation in the next six months
- It's critically acclaimed or popular, or both
- The series arc is sufficiently episodic that a sometime-viewer can pick up the thread pretty easily

In recent years, we've seen an explosion of the half-hour drama or dramedy – *Atlanta*, *Dead to Me*, *Fleabag*, *Search Party*, etc. These are all rich, intriguing templates, but alas, they are off limits for us this semester.

Network drama television has been a mixed bag for several years, with a few critically acclaimed series (*This Is Us*, the just-finished *Jane the Virgin*) fighting to match the sophistication and budgets of shorter, premium cable series. Keeping in mind the above requirements, here are a few options we might consider:

1. *Claws*
2. *Succession*
3. *The Good Doctor*
4. *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*
5. *This is Us*

You're welcome to suggest other options, provided they meet the above criteria and have sufficient support from the class, but I reserve the right to veto a series that I deem insufficiently challenging or impossibly so.

Pronouns Policy

I use the pronouns she/her/hers and I invite you to share your pronouns, either verbally during or after classtime or privately via email, as you prefer. In the spirit of a supportive and safe writers' room, I ask that we endeavor to refer to each other by the pronouns we've shared, while understanding that pronouns are not necessarily indicative of an individual's gender identity.

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 take notes and/or use your phone's voice memo feature to record the conversation. At no other time may you record lectures or workshops without the consent of the instructor, per department policy.

As in a professional writers' room, material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the internet.

(If you're interested in learning more about the value of deep focus and creative work, I recommend Cal Newport's Deep Work. Although Newton is an academic, his workload

closely resembles that of many professional TV writers, and serves as an invaluable example of how to balance competing obligations.)

Grading Criteria

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

421 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 participation during class -- what I call "staff ethic" -- is also important. This means not just giving and receiving notes, but familiarizing yourself with the shows you're not writing, 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%
Worksheets, Practice Beatment & Pitches:	20%
Beatment:	10%
Outline:	20%
Final script (Due by 7 p.m on Saturday, December 14th):	40%
TOTAL	100%

Writing Division policy gives this 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%

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 (for example, from A to A-). A third unexcused absence will result in your grade being lowered another full point (as in, from B to B-). Your grade will be lowered by one point for every absence after that.

Two late arrivals = one full absence. In order for absence to be excused, you must have approval from the instructor.

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 the instructor prior to class, or the Writing Division (213) 740-3303.

CTWR 421 Class Schedule

Please note that topics and assignments are subject to change at the discretion of the instructor. In particular, additional worksheets and/or revised outlines may be assigned to ensure students produce a compelling final draft. Screenings will be incorporated as appropriate and time permits.

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

Week 1: Wednesday, August 28, 2019

Class and instructor introduction

Syllabus and student survey

Discussion of hour-long drama, analysis of network vs. cable drama – differences in structure, tone, content, broadcast cycle. Discuss landscape of television.

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Read *Writing the TV Drama Series*: Chapter 1.
2. Watch one (1) episode apiece from three (3) series (network, cable and streaming).
3. Write a paragraph summarizing the story of each episode, save as a PDF and email to instructor by 7 p.m. on Sunday, September 1.

Week 2: Wednesday, September 4, 2019

Discuss the viewed episodes and summaries. Review hour-long act structures and story lines (A, B, C), and examine how they apply to the viewed episodes.

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Read *Writing the TV Drama Series*: Chapter 3.
2. Watch an episode of a TBD series.
3. Draft a BEATMENT for the viewed episode, tracking A, B & C story beats by act. Save as a PDF and email to instructor by 7 p.m. on Sunday, September 8.

Week 3: Wednesday, September 11, 2019

Discuss series beatments. Select the two to three series we'll be tackling this semester.

Discuss story ideation and best practices.

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Read *Writing the TV Drama Series*: Chapter 4, through "Sonny's List."
2. View an episode of your chosen series.
3. Complete the EPISODE WORKSHEET, save as a PDF and email to instructor kapowers@usc.edu by 7 p.m. Sunday, September 15.
4. DRAFT 5 PITCHES for possible storylines, save as a PDF and email to instructor by 7 p.m. Sunday, September 15.
5. Prepare to pitch and workshop your storylines in class.

Week 4: Wednesday, September 18, 2019

Workshopping storylines.

Discuss breaking story, the concept of "carding," and writing to act breaks.

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Draft a BEATMENT, save as a PDF and email to instructor and classmates by 7 p.m., Sunday, September 22.
2. Read classmates' BEATMENTS and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 5: Wednesday, September 25, 2019

Workshop beatments. Demonstrate carding to class. Discuss formats for TV outlines. Discuss structure/rules/importance of outlines, how to create an outline from a board.

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Card your episode.
2. Prepare to pitch episode to the class using cards.
3. Begin drafting your outline.

Week 6: Wednesday, October 2, 2019

Pitch episode to the class using cards. Incorporate writer's room feedback into episode.

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Finish your outline, save as a PDF and email instructor and classmates by 7 p.m., Sunday, October 6.
2. Read classmates' outlines and prepare feedback for next class.
3. Read the rest of Chapter 4 from *Writing the TV Drama Series*.

Week 7: Wednesday, October 9, 2019

Workshopping Outlines

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Some or all writers may need to revise their outlines before heading to script; they should email the revised outlines by 7 p.m., Sunday, October 13.
2. Those writers ready to start writing pages should email a PDF of ~ 5 script pages to instructor and classmates by 7 p.m., Sunday, October 13.
3. Read classmates' outlines and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 8: Wednesday, October 16, 2019

Workshopping Revised Outlines and Pages

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Everyone will email ~ 5-10 script pages to instructor and classmates by 7 p.m., Sunday, October 20.
2. Read classmates' pages and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 9: Wednesday, October 23, 2019

Workshopping Pages

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Email ~ 10-15 script pages to instructor and classmates by 7 p.m., Sunday, October 27.
2. Read classmates' pages and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 10: Wednesday, October 30, 2019

Workshopping Pages

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Email ~ 20-25 script pages to instructor and classmates by 7 p.m., Sunday, November 3.
2. Read classmates' pages and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 11: Wednesday, November 6, 2019

Workshopping Pages

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Email ~ 30-35 script pages to instructor and classmates by 7 p.m., Sunday, November 10.
2. Read classmates' pages and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 12: Wednesday, November 13, 2019

Workshopping Pages

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Email ~ 40-45 script pages to instructor and classmates by 7 p.m., Sunday, November 17.
2. Read classmates' pages and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 13: Wednesday, November 20, 2019

Workshopping Pages

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Email full drafts to instructor and classmates by 7 p.m., Sunday, November 24.
2. Read your current drafts and email a list of 3-8 goals for the revised first draft to kapowers@usc.edu by 7 p.m. Tuesday, November 26.
3. Read drafts and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 14: Thanksgiving Break – No Class**Week 15: Wednesday, December 4, 2019**

Workshopping Drafts

Discussion of next steps and industry realities.

ASSIGNMENT: Revise scripts and email to instructor by 7 p.m., Saturday, December 14.

Classes end: Friday, December 6, 2019**Finals Week: Wednesday, December 11-Wednesday, December 18, 2019****FINAL DRAFT SCRIPT DUE: 7 P.M. on SATURDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2019**

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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” 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, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Support Systems:

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

engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

Student Health Leave Coordinator – 213-821-4710

Located in the USC Support and Advocacy office, the Health Leave Coordinator processes requests for health leaves of absence and advocates for students taking such leaves when needed.

<https://policy.usc.edu/student-health-leave-absence/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call

suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

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

engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) | Title IX - (213) 740-5086

equity.usc.edu, titleix.usc.edu

Information about how to get help or help a survivor of harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following protected characteristics: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations.

Bias Assessment Response and Support - (213) 740-2421

studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions for appropriate investigation and response.

The Office of Disability Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776

dsp.usc.edu

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

USC Support and Advocacy - (213) 821-4710

studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssu

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101diversity.usc.edu

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on calldps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on calldps.usc.edu

Non-emergency assistance or information.

Diversity and Inclusion

Diversity and Inclusion are foundational to the SCA community. We are committed to fostering a welcoming and supportive environment where students of all identities and backgrounds can flourish. The classroom should be a space for open discussion of ideas and self-expression; however, SCA will not tolerate verbal or written abuse, threats, harassment, intimidation or violence against person or property. If students are concerned about these matters in the classroom setting they are encouraged to contact their SCA Diversity and Inclusion Liaison, <http://cinema.usc.edu/about/diversity.cfm>; e-mail diversity@cinema.usc.edu. You can also report discrimination based on a protected class here <https://equity.usc.edu/harassment-or-discrimination/>

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