

WRITING THE ORIGINAL SITUATION COMEDY PILOT
CTWR 437
#19449
Fall 2019

Instructor: F.J. Pratt

Class schedule: Mondays, 10:00AM – 12:50pm

Class Location: SCI 206

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 *original* comedy. 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 original comedy pilot script for industry.

Course Reading

The TV Writer's Handbook by Ellen Sandler

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 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.

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.

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 pilot 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 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.

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

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!

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/ssa

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

Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101

diversity.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 call

dps.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 call

dps.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