

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

**WRITING THE HALF HOUR COMEDY SERIES
CTWR 434
#19153
Spring 2020**

Instructor: F.J. Pratt (email: fjpratt@usc.edu)

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

Class Location: SCB 304

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 episode for a current half hour comedy series. 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 comedy script for industry.

Course Reading

The TV Writer's Handbook by Ellen Sandler

Sitcom script (to be determined.)

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 assessed 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.

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.

Recording Devices:

You may not record lectures or workshops without the consent of the instructor.

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 a not. A warning for the first offence will be followed by a lowering of a grade for the second offence.

Writing Division Attendance Policy:

Students are expected be on time, prepared for each class, and meet professional standards.

Students are allowed two absences throughout the semester.

On the third absence, students will have their final grade lowered by 10% and an additional 10% for each absence thereafter. Two late arrivals equates to one full absence.

NOTE: Exceptions will be made in the case of religious holidays and DSP accommodations.

In the case of medical emergencies, family emergencies, or allowances needed for personal well-being, all concerns must be communicated and approved by the Instructor. If there is a difference of opinion, the student can contact the Writing Division at (213) 740-3303 or writing@cinema.usc.edu

If a student has an emergency and additional accommodations are needed, those accommodations will need to come through the USC Campus Support and Intervention (CSI) office. The Writing Division recommends the student and/or advocate contact CSI at 213-821-4710 and their home department adviser for additional support.

Please be aware 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.

Sitcoms We Will Choose To Write

To be determined by the class on the first day. We will choose two shows to spec. Most likely they will be single cam shows. Multi is dead right now. No animation. Sorry, Adult Swim nerds.

Class Schedule and Assignments

WEEK 1: Jan 13th - 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 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 sit-com script.

Arc the main conflict for the characters and why it works for who they are.

Come up with two (2) separate ideas for your spec episode.

WEEK 2: Jan 27th - 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.

Romantic comedies.

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

In class pitching of spec ideas.
ASSIGNMENT: Rewrite and expand the pitch.
Read a sample of the episode you've chosen.

WEEK 3: Feb 3rd - 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: Feb 10th - 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: Feb 24th - 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: March 2nd - "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: March 9th - 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: March 23rd - 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: March 30th - 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: April 6th WHAT STAYS. WHAT GOES

Pace, rhythm and tone.

Compare current series first drafts to the AS BROADCAST draft.

Continue class review of second drafts.

ASSIGNMENT: Complete second draft of episode (Group B)

WEEKS 11 – 13: April 13th – April 20th - 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: April 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)

And... THE BUSSINESS PART

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.

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 Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards and Appropriate Sanctions* <https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. 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/>.

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 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 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**

And lastly... 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! Honestly, I can't stand tardiness!

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 9\$ 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!