

INTRODUCTION TO TELEVISION WRITING

CTWR – 321

19306

SPRING, 2020

THURS: 7 – 10 pm SCA 342

Professor: Siavash Farahani

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OVERVIEW:

There are, of course, similarities in writing for features and television. Each requires an understanding of character, a sense of plot and story structure and the skilled use of visualization to add to the emotion, tone and mood of the unfolding drama. However, while these similarities are undeniable, there are also specific and marked differences. Unlike most features, a TV series has main characters that have already been created and defined. In television, the amount of time to dramatize an episode is absolute. There is no variance or wiggle room. Most features have a beginning, a middle and an end. Of late, the trend of most TV series is to have arcing stories that can be sustained over a full season or, sometimes, for several years. This class is designed for students who have an interest in understanding and delving into the art and craft of writing for the one hour television drama. It will explore the reasons for the rules of TV writing as well as the very nature of television 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.

PRE-REQUISITE: CTWR 412

COURSE OBJECTIVE:

Write scenes for various existing TV drama series that demonstrate skill in several current genres. Understand and write scenes for both an A story and a B story. Work on scenes with a writing partner to understand the collaborative nature of television writing. Take part in the process of a Writers Room which mirrors as close as possible what it's like in the real world of TV drama. As a class, break a story and collaborate on the writing of a complete episode for a current drama. This will serve as the final course project.

COURSE GOALS:

- Exposure to the process of writing episodic TV drama
- Appreciation of outstanding television series writing
- How to choose a spec story from an existing series
- Study of effective scenes from excellent TV scripts
- Overall development of writing skills through writing scenes

CLASS SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNMENTS:

Note: Scenes must be written in a scriptwriting format. For the sake of compatibility we will all use the latest version of Final Draft which is available to students at a discount through the Writing Division. Assignments may be read on laptops, tablets or phones.

Week 1

Introduce ourselves. Introduction to the principles of writing for an episodic TV drama series. How episodic series writing differs from other kinds of screenwriting in conception, intention, characterization and structure. Overview of the business of TV writing. Go over the syllabus. Screen a pilot of a current one hour dramatic series.

Assignment: Electronically search out the pilot script and read it.

Week 2

Discuss the script that you read for homework and compare it to the pilot that was screened. Discuss the structure of a typical hour show (commercial, cable, premium). Three sample series will be assigned. These sample series will be the basis (until the final project) for the scenes written for this course.

Assignment: Read scripts from the sample series and watch several of the episodes to understand their genres and structure. Write an original scene for one of the shows, capturing as closely as possible its voice and tone

Week 3

Workshop and discuss the scenes. Discuss dramatic tension in a two to three minute scene. Review script format and basics of characterization and dialogue.

Assignment: Write a scene from the show that you feared most to write.

Week 4

Workshop and discuss scenes – how to engage and end a scene, tighten dialogue and avoid exposition. Discussion of sequence and how one scene builds and leads to another.

Assignment: Write two scenes where the first leads to the second and in that scene there is a discovery or revelation for the main character.

Week 5

Workshop and discuss scenes. Discussion of A & B storylines and why they are so common in television drama. Discussion of arcing storylines and how they can progress over an entire season. Also, discuss the importance of strong guest characters and how they enhance the series.

Assignment: Write an A scene and a B scene. At least one of these scenes should have a strong guest character.

Week 6

Workshop and discuss scenes. Continue discussion of multiple storylines and how they accommodate an ensemble cast.

Assignment: Write three scenes for one of the series. Scenes 1 & 3 will be the A story. Scene 2 will be the B story.

Week 7

Workshop and discuss scenes. Discuss the unique culture of a TV writing staff and the importance of a Writers Room. Class will be divided into pairs.

Assignment: Each team will pick one of the three series and will then write four scenes (two from the A story; two from the B). After each team has written his/her scenes, they will exchange them and give notes to each other so that it appears that all four scenes are seamless and were written by the same person.

Week 8

Workshop and discuss scenes. Discuss the principles of team writing and what it was like to collaborate – advantages and possible disadvantages. Discuss final class project. Class will choose a dramatic series, currently on the air that has not, as yet, been examined or discussed. This will take place in class. Once the series is chosen, the following will be the assignment:

Assignment: Watch at least three episodes of the series and make notes on its characters, tone, theme, the world in which it takes place and the format. Write up two concepts to discuss for a possible episode.

Week 9

Choose a showrunner (s) and create a Writers Room. Using a whiteboard (with the designated showrunner [s] leading the room) discuss and develop the concept that will be the episode that the class will write.

Assignment: Make notes on the concept so that at the next class, we can begin to outline the episode, breaking it down into scenes and acts.

SPRING BREAK

MARCH 15-22, 2020

Week 10

Outline Acts One and Two on the whiteboard.

Assignment: Make notes on the first two acts and be prepared to make suggestions on Acts Three and Four the following week.

Week 11

Outline Acts Three and Four on the whiteboard.

Assignment: Assign acts and scenes to writers so that the first two acts can be read the following class.

Week 12

Read and workshop Acts One and Two. Discuss the scenes in terms of clarity and progression of story. Look for inconsistencies and repetition of information. Do the voices of the main characters ring true?

Assignment: Revise Acts One and Two and write Acts Three and Four.

Week 13

Read and workshop Acts Three and Four. Continue to discuss the principles applied to writing an episode and making it appear that it has one vision and point of view even though multiple writers have had a hand in the creation.

Assignment: Revise scenes in all four acts and have them done in time to send to the showrunner(s) so that a final polish can be completed and a full script printed out.

Week 14

Read full script and have one more series of notes to tighten and clarify scenes that may still be in need of work.

Assignment: Showrunners do one final polish.

Week 15

Hand out final completed draft of episode and do a table read of the entire script. Review concepts covered over the course of the semester. Final questions and closing remarks.

SUGGESTED READING:

WRITING THE TV DRAMA SERIES – FOURTH EDITION

By Pamela Douglas

SAVE THE CAT

By Blake Snyder

GRADES:

10% Participation in discussion of other students' work.

45% First drafts of scenes brought to class

45% Contribution to final project

As per Writing Division policy the following is a 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%

A : Work of **excellent** quality. Outstanding application of the dramatic principles and fulfillment of course requirements and deadlines as specified in the syllabus.

B : Work of **good** quality. Above average fulfillments of course requirements and deadlines.

C : Work of **fair** quality. Minimum fulfillment of course requirements and deadlines for passing graduate credit.

C-: FAIL to meet minimum grade for credit. NON PASSING GRADE.

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 be on time and prepared for each class.

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: This is a change in policy. Instructors will no longer distinguish between an excused or unexcused absence. An absence will be an absence.

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/or know you will miss class please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

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.

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:

LAPTOPS AND CELL PHONES will only be used in class for current class work. There are no exceptions.

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) 740-2101

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