

WRITING THE HALF HOUR COMEDY SERIES PILOT
CTWR 537
#19234D
Spring 2020

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

Class schedule: Wednesdays, 4pm – 6:50pm

Class Location: SCA 342

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 pilot script for industry.

Course Reading

The TV Writer's Handbook by Ellen Sandler (*this is optional. It's an interesting book, but by no means a script writing bible. We'll learn more in class!*)

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

10% story pitches

20% story outline

15% first act

15% second act

30% final draft

TOTAL: 100%

As per Writing Division policy the following is the breakdown of the numeric grade to letter grade:

A: 100% to 94%
A-: 93% to 90%
B+: 89% to 87%
B: 86% to 83%
B-: 82% to 80%
C+: 79% to 77%

C: 76% to 73%
C-: 72% to 70%
D+: 69% to 67%
D: 66% to 63%
D-: 62% to 60%
F: 59% to 0%

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.

Schedule and Assignments

WEEK 1: Jan 15th - 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 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 22nd - 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: Jan 29th - 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 5th - 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 12th - 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: Feb 19th - "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: Feb 26th - 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 4th - 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 11th - 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: March 25th - 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 1st – April 15th - 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 22nd - 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: April 29th - FINALS WEEK – 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 for Students with Disabilities

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure that the letter is delivered to the Professor as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open from 8:30 am to 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776

Statement on Academic Integrity

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty included the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. SCAMPUS, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 1.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/>. Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/>.

Emergency Preparedness/Course Continuity in a Crisis

In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies.

Please activate your course in Blackboard with access to the course syllabus. Whether or not you use Blackboard regularly, these preparations will be crucial in an emergency. USC's Blackboard learning management system and support information is available at blackboard.usc.edu.

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.

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!

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.

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!