

434 - Writing The Half-Hour Comedy Series Section 19409D - 2 Units (Spring Term) 2020
 Professor Christopher J. Moore - revised 1/13/2020

School of Cinematic Arts

The John Wells Division of

Writing for Screen and Television

434 - Writing The Half-Hour Comedy Series Section 19409D - 2 Units
 (Spring Term) 2020

Instructor: Christopher J. Moore

Class Schedule: Tuesday, 4:00 – 6:50pm

Class Location: SCA 363

Office Hours: After class or by appointment (contact me in class, or by email).

Contact Info: CMoore71@usc.edu; or Department Offices 213 740-3303?

Possible Shows to Spec: Glow, Curb Your Enthusiasm, Barry to be decided...

COURSE OBJECTIVE: To write an episode of an existing half-hour comedy series, with emphasis on the anatomy of a joke, comedic structure, and character. To that end, the class will learn to function as a comedy half-hour writers' room. In order for each student to write a script for an existing (still in production) half-hour television series. The steps taken toward this end will be of a progressive nature with each step being a portion of the final grade for the course. First step, the students will study, with the professor's help, a chosen half-hour comedy, to gain an understanding of the characters, "voice" and template of the series. The next step, students will create 3 episode premises and pitch those ideas to the class. With the help of the class, one episode premise will be chosen for script development per student. In the next step, each student will write a one page Beat Sheet that will break their story into Act Breaks typical of the chosen series and which delineates the story setup that propels the story from its beginning, through the complications, twists and turns of its middle, toward a satisfying ending. In the next step, a scene-by-scene Outline laying out the blueprint of the entire screenplay will be crafted with class help. It is here in detailing the comedy sequences, predicaments and some comedy dialogue that the class will be drawn upon for their invaluable input. In the remaining steps, each student will write a full half-hour Script. This finished script will be a document that can be worked on in the future and polished to a standard that could serve as a spec sample of half-hour writing in the student's screenwriting portfolio.

COURSE DESCRIPTION: An understanding of the half-hour television genre by writing an episode of an existing half-hour comedy series, with emphasis on the anatomy of a joke, comedic structure, and character. In this class we will:

Explore a sampling of sitcoms currently in production to identify genre, comedic style as well as explore the differences between Multiple Camera and One Camera Formats.

Explore the "voice" and template of a half-hour series.

Explore the attitude, want and flaw of the main character/s.

Study the Storytelling Process of half-hour, Act Structure of TV sitcoms vs single camera.

Study the use of "A" "B" and "C" plots.

Craft a Beat Sheet that charts the goal of the protagonist and the obstacles to the goal.

Understand the importance of the Story Outline in order to lay the foundation for a well-crafted story with delineated comedy moments in preparation to write the script.

Explore the Process of Writing the First Draft.

Introduce techniques for artful half-hour exposition, joke structure, pace and rhythm.

Heighten motivation and conflict.

Learn the importance of brevity.

Learn the rules of collaboration by committee.

SKILLS:

Enhanced knowledge of the half hour sitcom format.

Ability to pitch an episode idea.

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Learn how to tell a strong story in twenty minutes.
 Improved command of comic pacing and joke structure.
 Experience working in a TV Writers Room.

PORTFOLIO:

Story Beat Sheet and Outline for Spec Episode
 Spec Sitcom Script

COURSE READING: Write to TV by Martie Cook 2nd edition

GRADING:

10% Class Participation includes: attendance, being supportive, being on time, constructive criticism and providing help and input on each classmate's work in progress.
 5% Research and Story Pitches
 5% Story Beat Sheet
 10% Story Outline
 10% 1st Quiz
 10% 2nd Quiz
 20% Write Rough Drafts (NOTE: writing may be broken up into 3 Acts – one due per week)
 30% FINAL SCRIPT
 100% In Total

FINAL SCRIPT grading standards: The Final Draft will be assessed for the following qualities:
 Basic writing rules, you've learn from assigned text book, Write to TV by Martie Cook 2nd edition?
 Does it realize the promise of the Story Outline?
 Is the story and structure within the style and template of the series?
 Are the voices of the characters true to the original series?
 Is the draft correct in structure, form and professional appearance?
 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%

Expectation of Professionalism:

Be on time, come to all classes, participate in class discussion, read and critique your own and fellow students' work, complete all in-class assignments and complete all outside assignments. All assignments must be completed in a timely fashion. Proof read your script for typos and correct formatting!
 The completed script will be turned in during the final week and will count as the final for this course.

The class will duplicate as much as possible the atmosphere of a professional "writers' room" of a sitcom during production. Students will function as the equivalent of a professional writing staff, with the instructor filling the role of "show-runner." As with a real sitcom staff, the class will have the opportunity to offer constructive criticism of each other's work. Students will also participate in group rewrites, where they will be expected to help "punch up" material submitted by fellow students. A portion of each student's script will be read aloud at least once during the course in the equivalent of a sitcom "table read." It is therefore very important to attend each and every class.

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.

Even if you cannot make a class, you must post homework on Blackboard or have someone hand in your homework for you. The delivery of late or incomplete assignments without appropriate excuse will lower your grade one grade point per assignment. The Final Script is the equivalent of the final exam. It is due on the last day of class.

You will be required to write in standard script format. There are numerous software programs that are available. Good writing is rewriting and it's also proofreading. Sloppy work with typos, dropped words, bad grammar or misspellings is not only unprofessional but shows a lack of respect for the effort and time that went into the project and is, therefore, unacceptable.

PLEASE NOTE: It is understood that ideas shared or "pitched" in class will be free to be used by the class. Students who pitch suggestions to other students do so with the understanding that authorship goes to the recipient. This is in keeping with the Writers Guild of America accepted tradition of writing "in the room" and "tabling a script" for a sitcom. Sharing of ideas benefits the learning process and all students as a whole. Students should think of the class as a giant support group ready and willing to nurture their creative spirit. Notwithstanding the above, see Academic Integrity policy noted below.

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 during class: CELL PHONE use will not be permitted during class-room hours. No texting. Laptop computers may be used for note taking during specified periods only. Do not browse the Web during class!!!!

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.

CLASS SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNMENTS:

1/14/2020

WEEK 1 —Introduction—— The value of the spec script in the TV marketplace. Finding your voice. The process of crafting a solid spec from outline through final draft. How to evaluate the characters and conflict of an existing comedy series. The importance of story work and structure for multi-camera vs single camera half hour TV. Discuss shows we will be writing! The do's and don'ts of pitching.

ASSIGNMENT: Prepare three separate ideas for your spec episode. (Guidelines provided)
 Chart the character relationships and main conflict for class discussion.

1/21/2020

WEEK 2--The Pitch--In-class screening of an episode produced from the shows assigned in Week 1. Discussion of the main conflict of the episode and its development. A class pitch session of spec ideas.

ASSIGNMENT---Refine and expand the pitch idea.
 Read a sample episode of chosen series.
 Read chapter 1 and 23.

1/28/2020

WEEK 3 --Working the Story--Continue the pitch process. Studying the storytelling process of individual comedy series. The narrative (and commercial) reality of telling a story in 20 minutes. Discussion of Ensemble Comedy---Glow

ASSIGNMENT: Prepare a beat sheet of your story (Model provided)
 Read chapter 2, and 4.

2/4/2020

WEEK 4—Storyville Following the story to a clear and organic resolution. The importance of the Ending. Creating the B Plot. Discussion of Family Comedy. Workshopping on Beat Sheets.

ASSIGNMENT: Prepare an outline of your story (Model provided.) Assign alternating A and B groups for future class presentations. Read chapter 5, 6, and 7.

Study for your Quiz for next week, based on (text book) reading.

(PROGRAM NOTE:) Each student will make an individual appointment with the instructor to discuss their episode story.)

2/11/2020

WEEK 5--Sorry, More Story---Review Group A outlines. **Take QUIZ for 10 points!!**

ASSIGNMENT: Group A-- Refine and polish outlines. Read chapter 8.

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WEEK 6—Time to Write----Review Group B outlines. View and breakdown an episode of a current comedy series.

ASSIGNMENT: All Groups write Act 1 of spec script.

2/25/2020

WEEK 7—Moving Forward, Ever Forward----Theme and deeper character. Avoiding contrivances. Class review and reading of Act 1 work. (Group A)

ASSIGNMENT: Group A Refine Act 1.

3/3/2020

WEEK 8—Building to the Resolution-Earning a strong ending. Class review and reading of Act 1 work. (Group B)

ASSIGNMENT: Group B Refine Act 1. Write Act 2 (Both Groups)

3/10/2020

WEEK 9—Writing is Re-Writing--The craft of re--writing in comedy. Heightening motivation and obstacles to protagonist's goal. Continue class review of drafts. (Group B)

ASSIGNMENT: Complete Second Draft of episode (Group B)

SPRING BREAK!!!

3/24/2020

WEEK 10—What Stays and What Goes-Pace and Rhythm. Comparison of current series--First Draft to Final Show Draft. Continue class review of drafts. (Group A)

ASSIGNMENT: Complete Second Draft of episode. (Group A)

3/31/2020

WEEKS 11—The Room aka We Get This Joke and We Can Eat Lunch

The rules of collaboration by committee. Room re-writing on second drafts. Study class notes and read chapter 20, for the **QUIZ the following week**.

ASSIGNMENT: Polish Second Draft (Both Groups) **Study for your Quiz for next week!**

4/7/2020

WEEK 12 — ROOM REWRITE — Take Quiz for 10 points!!

4/14/2020

WEEK 13 —ROOM REWRITE

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4/21/2020

WEEK 14—How the Pros Do It---A Room re-writing session with two professional comedy producer/writers.

ASSIGNMENT: One solid idea for your next spec script (Both Groups).

4/28/2020

WEEK 15—The Business--Networking the sitcom business---Finding representation---Creating and maintaining a writing career.

FINAL ASSIGNMENT DUE: Completed Script (DATE TBA)

Suggested Reading: The Comic Tool Box by John Vorhaus, The Comedy Bible by Judy Carter

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,

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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/note-takers/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: THIS SYLLABUS IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE!!

<p>PLEASE NOTE: FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX</p>
