

## School of Cinematic Arts Writing Division

### CTWR 534 Section 19258D

Advanced Half-Hour Television Comedy

Fall 2020

Wednesdays 10:00 AM - 12:50 PM (Online)

Professor: Larry Balmagia

balmagia@usc.edu

Office hours: by appointment

Requisite: CTWR 514a

#### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

An introduction and guide to crafting a half hour comedy script.

Students will pitch story ideas for an individual 'spec script' that will be analyzed and enhanced by their fellow classmates. Each student is responsible for choosing a pre-existing half-hour sitcom (subject to the professor's approval, and in accordance with criteria we will cover in the first class), and become an expert with that sitcom. The student will then write a spec (speculative) script for that half-hour sitcom. The process will continue through outline, first, and final drafts.

**COURSE OBJECTIVE:** The goal is to complete an episode of a current half hour series (network or cable) by the end of the semester. The completed script will serve as the final for the course. It also becomes a viable sample of your work for the industry.

#### **ONLINE CLASS ATTENDANCE**

All classes will be held online via ZOOM. On-time attendance to all sessions is not only important, but in a workshop environment where the class will serve as a 'writer's room', your participation and support is vital. Besides, it's not like you'll have transportation issues like missing a train or a car breaking down. In short: to make this class work and to derive the most benefit from it, you simply have to *be there*.

#### **ONLINE CLASS ETIQUETTE**

Class dynamics are substantially compromised without the ability to see the people in class; therefore, the default is that students have their cameras on during synchronous online sessions. Those facing challenging situations, such as internet connectivity, illness, or home environments

that make this difficult or impossible shall contact me to work out accommodations. I encourage you to use virtual backgrounds, and earphones or headsets, should your home environment benefit from these privacies.

Keep yourself muted unless called on. When your camera is on, please dress as you would in the classroom, and behave as you would in a professional environment.

Students are not permitted to create their own class recordings without the instructor's permission. Violations of these policies will be met with the appropriate disciplinary sanction.

## **COURSE READING**

All course reading will be provided in PDF format via email. No book purchase is required.

## **CLASS SCHEDULE**

**(Note: Syllabus schedule is subject to changes at the discretion of the professor.)**

### **Aug. 19 - Class 1**

- Introduction, and review of syllabus and class scheduling.
- Story telling in a half-hour format and brief discussion of the evolution of the form.
- Choosing a show to write: What are the criteria for a good spec script, and writing sample that can lead to work in the industry?
- Brief discussion of the sub-genres in the form; family comedies, workplace comedies, ensembles, star-vehicles, etc.

### **ASSIGNMENTS:**

1. Choose a current series (per criteria covered in class), and come up with two (2) separate ideas for your spec episode.

2. Read chapters 3 & 4 in *TV Writer's Handbook* (provided)

### **Aug. 26 - Class 2**

- Creating a story from personal experience. Finding stories that resonate. Why the best stories are all about character and not about plot.
- Conflict is comedy: why conflict is necessary for story and *vital* for comedy. - Notes – how to give ‘em. How to take ‘em.

- In class pitching of spec script ideas.

*ASSIGNMENT:*

- Rewrite and expand the pitch.
- Read and watch a sample episode of the show you've chosen.

### Sep. 2 - Class 3

How different shows tell different stories:

- Finding the form, style, and tone of story construction and telling for each specific show.
- Structuring stories: The difference and objectives for 'A', 'B', and possibly 'C' stories in your episode.
- Continuation of the pitch process. Restructuring stories. Discussion of the purpose, scope, and use of a story 'beat sheet'.

*ASSIGNMENT:* Prepare a **beat sheet** of your story (Example provided).

Read chapters 7 & 8 in *TV Writer's Handbook*. (provided)

### Sep. 9 - Class 4

- Discussion of the function and utility of a 'writer's room'. How to work effectively in a collaborative environment ('Workshop' mode).
- Going over the beat sheets.
- Preparing the story outline; adding jokes, dialogue, etc. How detailed should you get?
- Class breaks into **A and B groups** for future workshop sessions.

*ASSIGNMENT:* Write a **full outline** (sample provided) based on your revised beat sheet.

**(NOTE: Each student will make an individual appointment with the instructor to discuss and develop their story.)**

### Sep. 16 - Class 5

- Building to a strong Act Break. The use of artful exposition: Show, don't tell.
- **Group A:** Workshop discussion and review of story outlines.

*ASSIGNMENT:*

**Group A** Refine outlines. Begin writing First Draft Part 1.

**BOTH GROUPS:** Read Chapter 13 in *TV Writer's Handbook* (provided)

**Sep. 23 - Class 6**

- View and breakdown an episode of a current show.
- Writing dialogue: Hearing character voices and rhythms. Playing the 'reality' of a scene.
- **Group B:** Workshop discussion and review of story outlines.

*ASSIGNMENT:*

**Group B** refine outlines. Begin writing First Draft Part 1.

**Sep. 30 - Class 7**

- Keeping it fresh: avoiding stale clichés in stories and jokes. Format: Why spelling, grammar, and proper formatting count.
- **Group A:** Workshop (Table read and notes) First Draft Part 1.

*ASSIGNMENT:* **Group A:** Re-write Part 1. Finish writing **Full First Draft.**

**Oct. 7 - Class 8**

- **Group B:** Workshop First Draft Part 1.

*ASSIGNMENT:* **Group B:** Refine and re-write Part 1. Finish writing **Full First Draft.**

**BOTH GROUPS:** Read Chapter 14 of *TV Writer's Handbook* (provided)

**Oct. 14 - Class 9**

- **Group A:** Workshop Full First Draft.

*ASSIGNMENT:* **Group A** Begin writing **Second Draft.**

**Oct. 21 - Class 10**

- **Group B:** Workshop Full First Draft.

*ASSIGNMENT:* **Group B** Begin writing **Second Draft.**

### Oct. 28 - Class 11

- **Group A:** Workshop Second Draft.

*ASSIGNMENT:* **Group A** Revise Second Draft.

### Nov. 4 - Class 12

- **Group B:** Workshop Second Draft.

*ASSIGNMENT:* **Group B** Revise Second Draft.

### Nov. 11 - Class 13

- **BOTH GROUPS:** “Punch-Up with the Pros”: Polish of Second Drafts with possible guest writers.

*ASSIGNMENT:* **BOTH GROUPS:** Finish Final Drafts of spec scripts (using ‘polish’ techniques we used in class)

**November 18 - FINAL ASSIGNMENT DUE: Turn in completed script.**

### GRADING

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%

Attendance and participation are vital to our room. Your fellow writers depend on your showing up and sharing your thoughts on their work, not to mention the note that can turn a scene or story around. Handing in assignments in a timely, complete manner is a routine every writer needs to get used to. In an ever-changing creative landscape your professionalism is one thing you can always depend on.

Participation --- 10%

Story pitches --- 5%

Beat Sheet - 10 %

Story outline --- 15%

First Draft Part 1 --- 10%

First Full Draft --- 15%

Second Draft --- 15%

Final Draft — 20%

The Final Draft (and all written assignments) will be assessed for the following qualities: Does it realize the promise of the story outline? Are the voices of the characters true to the original series? Is the script correct in structure and format? Were notes addressed appropriately?

### **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.

## **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](http://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](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

### **Support Systems:**

*Student Health Counseling Services - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call*  
[engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling](http://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](https://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](https://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](https://equity.usc.edu), [titleix.usc.edu](https://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](https://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](https://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](https://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](https://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](http://dps.usc.edu), [emergency.usc.edu](http://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](http://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](mailto: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.