

School of Cinematic Arts Writing Division

CTWR 324 Section 19297R

Introduction To Half-Hour Television Writing
Fall 2020

Thursdays 2:00 PM - 4:50 PM (Online)

Professor: Larry Balmagia
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Office hours: by appointment

Pre-Requisites: CTWR 412 or CTWR 413

Course Description

This class is designed for students who have an interest in understanding and delving into the art and craft of writing for the half-hour, character-driven, scripted television comedy. It will explore the reasons for the rules of TV writing as well as the very nature of the sitcom and its evolution over the years. Television is a collaborative experience and so is the writing process. That, too, will be explored and examined over the semester.

Please Note: Students in this course will be asked to collaborate on writing projects, including a completed 'spec' episode of an existing series.

For students who desire to end the course with a writing sample they can show as their own, this may NOT be the class for you. Look into CTWR 434 (Episodic writing for existing 1/2 hour shows) or CTWR 437 (Writing the original 1/2 hour pilot).

Course Objective

To write scenes for various existing TV Comedy series that demonstrate professional skill in several current comic platforms (i.e: multi-camera, single camera), and comic sub-genres of the form (i.e. 'romantic', 'family', 'workplace', 'buddy comedies', etc.)

To work on scenes with writing partner(s) to understand the collaborative nature of comedy writing. Taking part in the process of a Writers Room which mirrors the real world of TV Comedy.

As a class, break a story and collaborate on the writing of A COMPLETE EPISODE for a current comedy. This will serve as the final course project.

Course Theme

Comedy is Character. Each genre of TV comedy requires an understanding of character, which leads to creating conflict, which in turn leads to story, structure, theme, and ultimately what the Pros refer to as “the funny.”

Course Readings

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

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.

CLASS SCHEDULE

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

Aug. 20 - Class 1

Class introduction; syllabus.

Introduction to the principles of writing for an episodic TV comedy series and how sitcom writing differs from other forms of screenwriting in conception, intention, characterization and structure.

Brief overview of the history and development of the 1/2 hour situation comedy form, and the current state of the business of TV writing and the changing marketplace.

Watch an episode of a current 1/2 hour comedy to discuss and ‘deconstruct’, examining elements of the form.

Assignment: Read episode of current series (provided). Breakdown characters and story elements.

Aug. 27 - Class 2

Review and discuss the characters and differences between the content of the script and the final result on the screen. Discuss the characters and core relationships. “Reverse-engineer” the episode story into the story beats.

Break into Writing Teams (two students per team).

Watch another episode of a current 1/2 hour comedy to discuss and ‘deconstruct’, examining elements of the form.

Assignment: Using scripts provided as a guide, each **team** will write an original 2-3 minute scene for a current show, capturing as closely as possible the ‘voice’ and ‘tone’ of the series.

Sep. 3 - Class 3

Cast, table read, and discuss the chosen sitcom scenes. Discuss comedic conflict and basic scene structure.

Discuss how personal stories can become scripted episodes.

Watch another episode of current series. Discuss character relationships and basic story structure, including “A” and “B” stories.

Discuss criteria for choosing which shows to consider when writing a ‘spec’ episode.

Assignment: Each writing team to select a series and come up a ‘spec’ episode idea for a current show (following the criteria discussed in class).

Sep. 10 - Class 4

Writing teams will pitch episode ideas. Examine the scope and types of stories that work best in the 1/2-hour form. Examine how story ideas can be fresh and engaging, yet still draw upon the core character relationships and conflict of the series premise.

Discussion of how show writing staffs function. Overview of writing room dynamics and the process of collaboration. Discuss the giving, and taking, of notes from classmates.

Split into two writing “staffs” (Group A and Group B) - consisting of three writing teams (six students) each - which will work together for the remainder of the semester on the Final Project; a full spec episode of a current series.

Each staff will select a series for which to write a spec, and then collaborate on every phase: Story idea, beat sheet, outline, first and second drafts.

Assignment: Each writing “staff” will come up with two episode ideas for their chosen show. (Can be based on stories pitched in class, or can be totally new ideas).

Sep. 17 - Class 5

Discuss story ideas for both Shows: Break down overall story arcs on whiteboard. Discuss possible ‘B’ stories for each episode.

Assignment: Break down episode ideas into ‘beat sheets’. (Both groups).

Everyone is to watch at least two episodes of BOTH shows. You not only must be familiar with the show your team is writing, but also the other team’s show which you will be giving notes on.

Sep. 24 - Class 6

Mid-Term Quiz - Short answer questions about all facets of comedy television writing covered to date in class.

Screen: Episodes of series chosen for each project. Examine tone and feel (pacing, etc.) of each show.

Go over beat sheets for both shows. Break into specific scenes to form a ‘rough outline’.

Assignments: Both groups to begin expanding and refining outlines, adding detail and dialogue. Due next class: **Outline from Group A.**

Oct. 1 - Class 7

Workshop: **Group A** Story notes on full outline.

Full class will discuss, enhance, and help revise as needed. The goal: to have a solid outline at the end of class from which to begin writing the draft.

Breakout into separate groups to work on

Assignments: Group A: Begin writing first draft, part 1 - (first 15 pages).

Group B: Outline due next class.

Oct. 8 - Class 8

Workshop: **Group B** Story notes on full outline.

Full class will discuss, enhance, and help revise as needed. The goal: to have a solid outline at the end of class from which to begin writing the draft.

Assignments: Group B: Begin writing first draft, part 1 - (first 15 pages).

Group A: First 15 pages of First Draft due next class.

Oct. 15 - Class 9

Workshop: **Group A** Table read and notes on first draft, part 1.

Discuss in terms of clarity and progression of story. Look for inconsistencies and repetition of information. Do the voices of the main characters ring true?

Assignments: Group A: Re-write part 1, and complete writing First Draft.

Group B: Part 1 (first 15 pages) of First Draft due next class.

Oct. 22 - Class 10

Workshop: **Group B** Table read and notes on first draft, part 1. Discuss as above.

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.

Assignments: Group B: Re-write part 1, and complete writing First Draft.

Group A: Full version of First Draft due next class.

Oct. 29 - Class 11

Workshop: **Group A** Table read and notes on full first draft.

Assignments: Group A: Begin re-write (Second Draft) of full script.

Group B: Full version of First Draft due next class.

Nov. 5 - Class 12

Final Exam - Short essay questions on concepts covered in class.

Workshop: **Group B** Table read and notes on full First Draft.

Watch an episode of a 'classic' 1/2 hour comedy to discuss and 'deconstruct'.

Assignments: Group B: Begin re-write (Second Draft) of full script.

Both Groups: Second Drafts of full script due next class.

Nov. 12 - Class 13

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

Assignments: BOTH GROUPS: Finish Final Drafts of spec scripts (using 'polish' techniques we used in class)

November 19 - FINAL ASSIGNMENT DUE: Turn in completed scripts.

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.

Grading on collaborative writing assignments is only a portion of the final grade. Your individual grade for this course will also depend upon your on-time attendance, participation, and understanding of the basic concepts covered in class demonstrated by answers to exam questions.

Participation: 10%

First Scene Writing Assignment: 5%

Beat Sheet and Story Outline: 10%

Mid-Term exam: 10%

First Draft Part 1: 10%

Full First Draft: 10%

Second Draft: 15%

Final Exam: 20%

Final Draft and Polish --- 10%

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 to 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 equate 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. 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/sssa

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.