

**School of Cinematic Arts
The John Wells Division
Writing for Screen and Television**

**Staff Writing the Comedic Television Series
“No Small Talk”
CTWR 487
#19422
Fall 2020**

**Instructor: F.J. Pratt
Class Schedule: Wednesdays, 6:00-9:50 – Virtual
Office Hours: Whenever... I’m always available!
Email: fjpratt@usc.edu**

SPECIAL NOTE: Schedule and content subject to change.

OVERVIEW

In a medium where new stories are required each week, writing and re-writing skills become a most valuable asset. Moreover, the vision and adaptability of the Head Writer (aka the Show runner) determines the course of any scripted series. Writing students in this course will get to experience first-hand what it is like to work as Show runners and Staff Writers on a virtual half-hour comedy series. While this production will be blissfully free of development types, the instructor will act as the voice of the network/buyer – ‘cause ya always gotta listen to the buyer.

COURSE GOAL

This experience is an incredible opportunity for writing students to get first hand experience with creating, writing and re-writing a pilot episode of an SCA created TV series, pitch further episodes, in addition to collaborating with a corresponding Production Division class (CPTR 484, Advanced Multi-Camera Television Workshop) in producing a final product.

Students will interact with other writers, producers, directors, editors, crew and yes, actors. Students must all work together to take a show from the page to the stage and into the living room. In the process of dealing with other creative types, each student will hopefully have learned the essential skill of collaboration and the humbling experience of another writer having a better joke.

COURSE OBJECTIVE

A pilot episode of a student-created TV series will be shot virtually! DVD's of the finished product distributed at the end of the course.

REQUIREMENTS

Students who apply for this course are expected to have completed CTWR 434, have written a spec script for a half hour comedy series and/ won an Emmy. The course is recommended for students, both graduate and undergraduate who have a serious interest in writing comedy for television.

VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE

All writing students are required to attend our virtual class hours from 6 p.m. to 9:50 p.m., Wednesday evenings. Most re-writing, production meetings, table readings with actors, and rehearsal run-thrus will take place during regular class hours. Until further notice, these will all be virtual. In addition, writing students may be required to meet with the Show Runner for occasional rewrites outside of class. All students are expected to be online for two weekends during the semester when episodes are shot on camera (See course schedule). We will also have several shoot days on Wednesdays beginning at 2:30. I'm aware that you have other classes, but I urge you to be part of these shoot days. Any students who fail to show up for classes, weekend assignments or rewrites will be considered nonexistent. This is a participation class so...you gotta. Look, at least you can do all this in the comfort of your own home!

Students who take on Show runner (Executive Producer) responsibilities are expected to be available for casting, additional re-write sessions as needed and post-production on their episodes.

Students with various Producer assignments (Casting, Pre-Production, Post--Production, Associate Producer) are expected to be available as needed for their individual assignments. Anyone who finds that they are unable to perform their duties should inform the instructor in due time to avoid being talked about in hushed tones at the craft service table.

Attendance is part of the real working life of production it's enormously important to get a feel for the grind of actual production. More importantly, this class is all about collaboration. If you are not present, you can't collaborate. In addition, you'll be considered absent. You'll also be considered a lot of other things if you leave your job or let down your team.

Note: The Instructor understands most students have multiple classes and responsibilities during the semester; so every effort is made to allow for real conflicts that arise.

GRADING

Since this class is essentially a weekly writing workshop, students will be graded on their participation in the room writing process, their ability to give constructive notes as well as receive constructive criticism. They will be graded on their initiative to bring new ideas and script fixes to class and the timely completion of any and all weekly homework assignments.

BREAKDOWN OF GRADE

Class Participation---10%

Individual assignments #1 and #2---20%

Team assignments #3 thru #7---50%

Final Review paper--Individual assignment #8--20%

Two unexcused absences automatically lower your grade one full point. Three unexcused absences will lower grade two full points, which, for grad students, sucks big time. Tardiness will be noted and two late arrivals will count as one full absence. There is important ground to cover in each session and as tardiness is looked down on in a professional writers room there's no reason to allow it here.

"Eighty percent of success is showing up"

Woody Allen

"Seriously?"

F.J. Pratt

COURSE SCHEDULE

WEEK 1 – August 19th

Course overview. Meet with Production Class. Exec Producers will describe pilot, it's intent, mood, look, etc. Supply CAST BREAKDOWNS and copies of FIRST DRAFT. A discussion of the production of a half hour comedy series. Students choose jobs and divide responsibilities.

SCRIPT COORDINATOR – Hard Copies/Sides, etc.

PRE-PRODUCTION PRODUCER

POST-PRODUCTION PRODUCER

CASTING DIRECTORS

A discussion of protocol in the rewrite room – do's and don'ts; The highs and lows of collaborative writing. Is collaboration a four-letter word? How a writing staff is like a volleyball team. Rolling with someone else's pitch. How to object to the show runner's choice (hint: 1 1/2 times... if you feel strongly.) Letting go of your own pitches when they sink. ***ROOM RE-WRITE BEGINS ON "NO SMALL TALK" Pilot.***

WEEK 2 - Aug. 26th

A discussion of methods for finding story ideas. Find 100 ideas, five will be good. Where's your heart? What makes a great character? How's it get you a story? Rewrite script, as necessary. Visit from professional TV Production Designer on the importance of production design in comedy.

"I make at least a hundred decisions a day, and at least half of them are wrong. The important thing is to keep making decisions."

Peter Casey, Co-creator/Show runner, Wings, Frasier

Assignment # 2 – Break down the characters in pilot we are working on and create at least one new conflict for with another character in the show. You can create one character that's not in the show. Be prepared to pitch it and why that character will add to the depth of the story.

WEEK 3 – September 2nd

Discussion of the importance of music and title sequence to a series. Discussion of giving and getting notes. How to receive bad notes without doling out physical violence. How to give notes without bringing a writer/actor to tears, and no, you don't want to do that. Room re-write continues on Pilot.

***** WEEKEND ONE *** Saturday, September 5th 10AM**

Casting. This will be done through online auditions.

Morning: Actors and Directors. **Afternoon:** Preliminary call backs for EPs and Directors and Actors. Possible re-write of pilot script.

WEEK 4 – September 9th

6-8pm - Casting callbacks upstairs in classroom with EPs/Directors/Crew. Final casting decisions will be made. Cast run-thru of Pilot. Do any final tweaks to script.

Assignment #3: Pairs of students will team up. Each pair will prepare five new jokes for the re-write of Episode #2.

WEEK 5 – September 16th

4PM Table Read

With actors, writers and entire crew.

5PM Production Meeting for entire crew, including selected writers. Table rewrite will begin.

WEEK 6 – September 23rd

Script punch-up.

WEEK 7 – September 30th

First full rehearsal with the cast. A discussion of how to fix a script in BIG trouble. A discussion of Gang Writing an episode.

WEEK 8 – October 7th

Rewrite of script as necessary. What could episode #2 be? Let's break that story!

WEEK 9 – Wednesday, October 14th - SHOOT DAY #1

2:30 – Block & Shoot!

WEEK 10 – Wednesday, October 21st – SHOOT DAY #2

2:30 – Block & Shoot!

WEEK 11 – Wednesday, October 28th - SHOOT DAY #3

2:30 - Block & Shoot!

WEEKEND TWO: SATURDAY, OCTOBER 31ST – SHOOT DAY #4

Time TBD

WEEK 12 – Wednesday, November 4th – SHOOT DAY #5

2:30 Block & Shoot!

WEEKEND THREE: SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 7th – SHOOT DAY #6

WEEK 13 – Wednesday, November 11th - SHOOT DAY #7 (And Pick-ups!)

2:00

WEEK 14 - November 18th

Possible Rough Cut Screening of “No Small Talk” It’s Study Week, so this would be optional.

WEEK 15 – NO CLASS... It’s Thanksgiving!

Wait for it...

FINAL SCREENING: TBD! Wouldn’t it be great if we could all watch this in person at the Ray Stark Theatre? A guy can dream, can’t he?

RECOMMENDED READING

The TV Writers Workbook by Ellen Sandler. But really... if you want the best read... get your hands on produced scripts!

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