

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

**WRITING THE HALF HOUR COMEDY SERIES
CTWR 434
#19355
Spring 2021**

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

Class schedule: Tuesdays, 4:00pm – 6:50pm

Class Location: Virtual

Office Hours: Whenever you need me... I'm available!

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 script for industry.

Course Reading

The TV Writer's Handbook by Ellen Sandler (suggested)

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%	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%

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

This class is a workshop and your participation in the discussion is important. Participation includes full involvement in, and contribution to, class discussion, as well as reading (in advance at times; see schedule) the assignments of your colleagues and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.

Class attendance is mandatory and students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Tardiness is unprofessional and disrespectful to the class. Two late arrivals equals one full absence. Two unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered by a half grade point (Ex. A to A-) Any further unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered another two thirds of a point (ex: B to a C+) for each absence.

Excused absences can include, but are not limited to: illness, both physical and mental; death of a loved one; personal emergency; sporting events (for Student-Athletes) or other university-sponsored activities; religious holidays, and so on.

If you find you must miss class due to personal emergency or personal crisis, please contact your professor as soon as possible so they can assist you in finding the appropriate University care and guidance. Your health and well-being are of utmost importance to the Wells Writing Division and to your Faculty.

NETIQUETTE

During Zoom Workshop Classes

- Since we are a small group, you will NOT have to mute your sound.
- If your camera is on, please dress as you would in the classroom, and behave as you would in a professional environment.

In Larger Lecture classes

- If you have a question for the DAs during the lecture, use the Chat function. (The DA will direct my attention to the question if they can't answer it.)
- If you want to ask a question out loud, use the "raise your hand" function on Zoom. A little blue hand will appear so that the DA knows you want to speak. The DA will get my attention. Don't unmute until called on.
- I answer questions in the fifteen minutes before and after the live lecture.

Posting in Forums

- Write as if you were speaking in a class discussion: relaxed in tone but respectful, polite, and professional in your choice of words.
- Post thoughtful and meaningful responses to questions and answers. The point is to have an ongoing discussion with your Blackboard Group of ten students and one DA. Your professor will be joining discussions as well.

Sitcoms We Will Choose To Write

To be determined by the class on the first day. We will choose two to three shows to spec. Most likely they will be single cam shows. Multi is dead right now. No animation. Sorry, Adult Swim nerds.

Class Schedule and Assignments

WEEK 1: Jan 19th - 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 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 26th - 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: Feb 2nd - 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 9th - 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 16th - 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 23rd - "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: March 2nd - 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 9th - 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 16th - 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 23rd – Wellness Day – NO CLASS

WEEK 11: March 30th - 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 12: April 6th - 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 13: April 13th – F.J.'s tricks in the craft of joke writing

If you haven't already felt more confident in your ability to write a joke... this class will do the trick!

WEEK 14: April 20th – A VOICE OTHER THAN MINE!

We will have a guest speaker who will fill your head and heart with wonderful sage advice about the brass tacks of being a TV writer.

WEEK 15: April 27th And finally... 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 Zoom room at 4PM 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.

Class Participation: Let me be brutally honest here... you guys make the class. The more fearless you are about speaking up and offering your insight... the better our time will be together. The best classes I've ever had are the ones where I would say, "*I think we need a stronger Act II*", and all of you, in a spirited and respectful way, come up with interesting fixes.

All assigned work must be uploaded to our Google Drive **NO LATER THAN SUNDAY at 3PM!** This will barely give us enough time to read everyone's work and be ready to discuss at class the following day, so turning your work on time is important.

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!