

CTWR 321: Introduction To Television Writing
(for Writing Majors)

2 units – Section 19364D

SYLLABUS – SPRING 2021

Instructor: Barbara Nance
Class Schedule: Fridays, 10:00 am – 12:50 pm
Class Location: ONLINE
Office Hours: By Appointment
Contact Information: BNance@cinema.usc.edu

Overview

There are many similarities in writing for features and television. Each requires an understanding of character, a sense of plot and story structure, organic dialogue, and the skilled use of visualization to add to the emotion, tone, and mood of the unfolding drama.

However, there are also specific and marked differences. Unlike most features, a TV series has main characters that have already been created and defined. In television, the amount of time to tell a story in an episode is absolute. There is no variance or wiggle room. Most features have a beginning, a middle, and an end. However, many TV series, especially in today's market, have arcing, serialized stories that are sustained over multiple seasons, as well as characters who change over season. An example is the Emmy award-winning show, *BREAKING BAD*, and its central character, Walter White.

This class will explore the reasons for the rules of TV writing as well as the very nature of television and its evolution over the years. The class is designed to escalate in intensity, culminating with a class participation in writing two complete spec episodes of a current TV drama. Welcome to the world of Television!

Course Objective

Write scenes for various existing TV drama series that demonstrate skill in several current genres. Understand and write scenes for both an A-story and a B-story. Work on scenes with a writing partner to understand the collaborative nature of television writing. Read/watch several episodes of a series and break down the plot and character arcs for presentation in class. Using that series as a template, arc out a ten-episode season. Take part in the process of a Writers Room which mirrors as close as possible what it's like in the real world of TV drama. As a class, divided into two groups, write two episodes that were arced.

Course Goals

- Recognize industry-standard quality series concepts and writing
- Develop the ability to create and pitch ideas for spec episodes
- Apply the building blocks of the one-hour drama spec structure
- Create a clear and succinct outline; and,
- Collaborate with group to execute a polished spec script from the outline

Prerequisite

1 from CTWR 100 or CTWR 402 or CTWR 412 or CTWR 413

Course Reading

- Writing the TV Drama Series (third edition) by Pamela Douglas (recommended but not required)

Grades

Scene work/exercises: (3 assignments, 10% each)	30%
Contribution to group project: -- involvement in breaking episode (20%) -- first draft (15%) -- revised draft (15%) -- participation in giving notes (10%)	60%
Final Solo project:	10%

	100%

All work is to be delivered via e-mail **no later than 7 pm on the WEDNESDAY EVENING prior to Friday’s class** to allow time for review/notes to be given to student during class. If work is not delivered by this deadline, notes from teacher are not guaranteed. Late assignments will result in grade being lowered 5 points for every 12 hours it is delayed, i.e., an 95 → 90 if delivered after 7 pm on Wednesday but before 7 am Friday morning; 95 → 85 if delivered before 7 pm Friday evening, etc.

All scripts and/or scene work must be written in a one-hour drama teleplay format (preferably using Final Draft). However, when submitting work to instructor, **file must be sent in .PDF format**. Other assignments should be done in Word.

A grade of incomplete will be considered only after the twelfth week of classes. The only acceptable reason for taking an incomplete in the course is personal illness or family emergency. Students must inform the professor on or before the twelfth week and present verifiable evidence in order for an alternative make-up plan to be developed.

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

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.

Attendance Policy

Despite being online, class attendance is mandatory. Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Tardiness is unprofessional and disrespectful to the class. Two late arrivals (over 10 minutes) equals one full absence. 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.

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.

The Online Classroom

Class dynamics are substantially compromised without the ability to see other 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.

Cell Phone Policy

NO CELLPHONE USAGE WHATSOEVER will be tolerated. Cell phones must be turned off or silenced (no vibrate) before class begins.

I'm not kidding.

Class Schedule

**NOTE: Class content is subject to change at the discretion of the professor.

Week 1 – Friday, January 15, 2021

Introduction to the principles of writing for an episodic TV drama series. How episodic series writing differs from other kinds of screenwriting in conception, intention, characterization and structure. Overview of the business of TV writing. Go over the syllabus. Screen a pilot of a current one-hour dramatic series.

Assignment: Read the script of that pilot.

Week 2 – Friday, January 22, 2021

Discuss the script that was sent out for homework and compare it to the pilot that was screened. Discuss the structure of a typical hour show (network, cable, premium). Discuss PCR/SCR as applied to scenes, acts, stories, seasons, series.

Assignment: Three sample series will be chosen. These sample series will be the basis for the original scenes which you will write. Read the three sample scripts and watch several of the episodes to understand their genres, character relationships, tone and structure.

Exercise #1: Write two scenes where the first leads to the second and in that second scene there is a discovery or revelation for the main character. Replicate as close as possible the voice and tone of the show.

Week 3 – Friday, February 29, 2021

Workshop and discuss the scenes you wrote for your Assignment. Discuss dramatic tension in a 2-3 minute scene. Review script format and basics of characterization and dialogue. Discuss active vs. passive action lines. Explain the “grid process” (pilot from Week 1).

Assignment/Exercise #2: In one-to-two sentences, identify each of the A, B, C, etc. storylines in the pilot script chosen to analyze. Break down/turn-in the pilot script by Act. Bullet-point each major beat of each act.

Week 4 – Friday, February 5, 2021

Workshop and discuss episode break down. Further discuss various genres/types of television (Sci-Fi, dramedy, procedural, etc.) Discuss A & B storylines and arcs, and why they are so common in television drama. Discuss the arcing storylines and how they can (and must!) progress over an entire season. Discuss the importance of strong guest characters and how they enhance the series. Class chooses a current drama on the air and will arc out a season and write two episodes based on the seasonal arc.

Assignment: Watch at least three episodes of the series that the class has chosen and make notes on its characters, tone, theme, the world in which it takes place and the format.

Exercise #3: Write two possibilities of where the A story can progress over a new season.

Week 5 – Friday, February 12, 2021

Create a writers room and begin to arc out an eight to ten episode season, paying attention to the main through line as well as some of the ancillary character arcs.

Assignment: Sketch in ideas for what will happen in each episode, beginning with episode one and ending with the last episode of the season.

Weeks 6-8 – Friday, February 19 & 26 // Friday, March 5, 2021

Class time is spent arcing out the episodic season.

Assignments: Continue to develop, independently, a progression of where the series will take the viewer.

Week 9 – Friday, March 12, 2021

NO CLASS – WELLNESS DAY

Week 9 – Friday, March 19, 2021

Choose a showrunner (s) to run the Writers Room. Using a whiteboard (with the designated showrunner [s] leading the room), begin to outline in detail episode one and a midseason episode as designated in the seasonal arc.

Assignment: Make notes on the outlines so that at the next class, we can begin to fill in some of the character and structural holes.

Weeks 10-11 – Friday, March 26 & April 2, 2021

Finish outlining the two episodes. Showrunners assign writing teams to work on the two episodes.

Assignment: Write assigned acts.

Weeks 12-13 – Friday, April 9 & 16, 2021

Read and workshop completed first drafts of both episodes.

Assignment: Original writers make revisions on their work and finish any work left to be done on the episode. Turn-in to your showrunner/s who will revise, hone, polish further.

Week 14 – Friday, April 23, 2021

Prior to class, Showrunners will email complete revised drafts of Class Series to all writers. We will perform a table read of both entire scripts.

Discuss Final Solo project

Final questions and closing remarks

Week 15 – Friday, April 30, 2021

NO CLASS – Wellness Day

Finals Week – Friday, May 6, 2021

Final Solo Project must be emailed to professor's USC email account by 1pm.

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 this letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The telephone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776. Should you have any questions, you may contact your Writing Instructor in the Writing Division office.

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

Disruptive Student Behavior:

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with Zoom 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 Zoom class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.