

SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
The John Wells Division of
Writing for Screen and Television
CTWR 539: Advanced Hour-Long Drama Series Pilot
Section 19447
Spring 2021

Instructor: Kate Powers
Class Schedule: Thursdays, 7-10 p.m.
Class Location: Online
Office Hours: Open Zoom office hours Friday 2 to 4 p.m. and by appointment
Contact Information: kapowers@usc.edu

Course Objective:

To deepen students' understanding of the hour-long dramatic series, with a focus on developing a productive writing process, using character development as a story breaking tool and constructive participation in a writers' room-type environment. From an initial written pitch, students will develop a world and characters, write an outline, create a bible, and complete a first and second draft of their series pilot.

Recommended -- But Not Required -- Course Materials:

Writing the Pilot by William Rabkin (2011)

Writing the Pilot: Creating the Series by William Rabkin (2017)

A Notebook with at least 240 pages/120 sheets, lined or not, as you prefer.

Course Description:

"If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." – Toni Morrison

"Make yourself happy." – Vince Gilligan

Once upon a time, every original drama pilot was written for either network or cable television. They were created largely under development deals, given to seasoned, senior-level writers who'd already broken forty or fifty episodes of television.

Today, the original pilot has become the essential writing sample for the aspiring TV writer -- managers want them, prestigious fellowships ask for them, and it is nearly impossible to be staffed without one (or more) in your portfolio.

Shorter than a feature, with the built-in expectation of launching a series, the original pilot is a demanding and difficult writing project -- and one of the most rewarding. From the tightly structured 6-act network procedural to the break-less premium series, the original pilot has become a chameleon, shifting and adapting to showcase voices and storytelling philosophies ranging from Lena Waithe's

The Chi to Robert and Michelle King's The Good Fight to Damon Lindeloff's Watchmen.

Over the next 15 weeks, we will analyze the structure of compelling pilots, brainstorm and evaluate premises, and use character bios and outlines to break story for an hour-long dramatic pilot. The initial seed may be a fictional character or your lived experience, a fascinating world or a horrifying problem, but week by week, you will be growing that seed into a compelling story that will blossom into a five or six season narrative that hooks your audience and never lets them go.

As writers and viewers, you already know the value of believable characters, intriguing conflicts and rich worlds. This course will encourage you to deepen that understanding and to develop your creative skill set, even if that means sometimes trying things that don't quite work.

Most of the time, this course will function as a weekly writers' room, where we will discuss and improve each other's ideas. Like any professional writer, you will be expected to read your colleagues' work ahead of time and to arrive with constructive notes. Whenever the class shifts into brainstorming, whether structured around character or story issues, your enthusiastic participation will be an invaluable addition to the process.

"A strong conflict needs nothing more than the necessity of a choice between two equal but irreconcilable ideas. What's important in a central conflict is not that it be complicated, but that it is impossible to resolve, and that it can manifest itself in myriad ways." – William Rabkin, Writing the Pilot

"You must first put your characters in the one, singular... situation that *most* challenges their true self. That's your operational theme – a weekly duel against your character's innermost identity. It is knowing the one thing your protagonist needs more than anything else in the world and then putting him or her in the scenario most likely to deprive them of it for years to come..." – Javier Grillo-Marxuach, Shoot This One

"You're born alone, you die alone, and this world just drops a bunch of rules on top of you to make sure you forget those facts. But I never forget. I'm living like there's no tomorrow, because there isn't one." – Matt Weiner, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, Mad Men

This syllabus -- and additional material, as appropriate -- will be available on Blackboard.

LAPTOP AND CELL PHONE POLICY:

The most effective writers' rooms restrict laptop and cellphone access to the writers' assistant -- and to a lesser degree, the showrunner -- in order to keep the staff focused on the work at hand.

Alas, Covid-19 has thrown a wrench in my usual request that you rely entirely on paper notebooks and documents, as I obviously cannot forbid the use of laptops in class.

That said, I do still require cellphones to be silenced and stored out of sight and all notifications (email, chat, Twitter, etc.) turned off for the duration of the class. I also ask that you have a full set of the week's pages downloaded and opened in the PDF viewer of your choice before class begins, and that you close any inessential programs. I find putting Zoom on Full Screen also minimizes distractions, whenever feasible.

As with physical classes, there will always be a 5 minute break in the second hour for checking email and refilling water bottles.

After some discussion, the division has concluded that online workshops function best with as much virtual face-to-face communication as possible. To that end, they've asked that we leave our cameras on during synchronous online classes. Those facing situations such as internet connectivity, illness, or challenging home environments should contact me to work out accommodations. I encourage you to use virtual backgrounds, earphones or headsets as needed.

When your camera is on, please dress as you would in the classroom, and behave as you would in a professional environment. Keep yourself muted when not speaking.

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

Zoom does have a recording feature, which is automatically on at the start of the class. When the conversation shifts to individual projects, I will be turning it off to protect your privacy as artists.

Grading Criteria:

For this class, weekly written assignments are to be delivered as PDFs, attached to an email to kapowers@usc.edu (and if required, to the entire class), USUALLY by 6 p.m. on the Tuesday before class. In April, there are a few exceptions to this deadline, all noted below.

Late assignments will result in the grade being lowered half a point. The file name, document header and email's subject line should read:

Last Name Assignment name (Revised Outline, Revised Act One, etc.) Date

For example, this document is named: Powers 539 Syllabus 012121

SCRIPTS should be written in Final Draft or Movie Magic Screenwriter.

Your grade is based primarily on written assignments. Your outline will serve as your mid-term exam; your second draft and series bible are your semester final.

You are expected to read ALL your classmates' submitted pages in advance of class, and to have prepared feedback, preferably physically written in a notebook or printed out, to avoid the distraction of moving between apps and ensure nothing slips your mind during the discussion.

Your participation during class -- what I call "staff ethic" -- is also important. This means not just giving and receiving notes, but listening to your classmates, contributing to the discussion and above all, helping create a safe space for this class to do its best work.

Staff Ethic:	10%
Pitches and Pilot Worksheet (2.5% each)	5%
Treatment:	5%
Beatment:	10%
Outline:	15%
First full draft:	20%
Statement and Goals Chart:	5%
Series Bible (10%) and Second Draft (20%):	30%
(both due via email by 6 p.m. on Tuesday, May 11)	

TOTAL	100%

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.

Please proof your assignment prior to submission. If an assignment contains more than three grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, format mistakes or typos per five pages, the resulting grade will be lowered by half a point, e.g. B to B-. A semester-long pattern of sloppy proofing or an obviously unproofed final script will result in a final grade being lowered by a full point, e.g. A- to B-.

Internet Policy:

Material discussed during class is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the internet.

Writing Division Attendance Policy:

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 (e.g. A to A-). Any further unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered another two thirds of a point (e.g. B to a C+) for each absence

Excused absences can include, but are not limited to: illness, both physical and emotional; 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.

Names and Pronouns Policy:

My pronouns are she/her. As an instructor, I always want to refer to my students by their preferred name and pronouns; please feel free to share your chosen name and pronouns, either verbally during classtime or privately via email. In the spirit of a supportive and safe writers' room, I ask that we endeavor to refer to each other by our chosen names and pronouns, while understanding that pronouns are not necessarily indicative of an individual's gender identity.

Class Schedule:

Please note that dates and assignments are subject to change at the discretion of the professor.

Week 1: Thursday, January 21, 2021

Class and instructor introduction; review syllabus

Workshopping expectations as writers and colleagues

Elements of pilot: Concept, characters, conflict, theme and franchise

The emotional core of compelling stories

ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. Prepare TWO one-page pilot premises (**2.5% of final grade**), complete with concept, characters, conflict, theme and franchise (i.e. two or three examples of possible episode storylines).
2. Select and watch an existing pilot that shares one or more elements with your favorite premise.
3. Complete the Pilot Analysis Worksheet (**2.5% of final grade**) for your selected pilot.
4. Email your worksheet and a PDF of TWO one-page pilot pitches to kapowers@usc.edu by **6 p.m. on Tuesday, January 26**.
5. Be prepared to discuss your worksheet and to verbally pitch your pilot premises in class.

Week 2: Thursday, January 28, 2021

Character and conflict as story-building tools

Discussion of pilot worksheets

Pitching of pilot premises

ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. Select your pilot premise, develop your A/B/C stories into a two- to three-page TREATMENT (**5% of final grade**); email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by **6 p.m. on Tuesday, February 2**.
2. Be prepared to discuss your pilot and pitch storylines in class.
3. Read treatments and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 3: Thursday, February 4, 2021

Workshopping pilot stories

Structure and tone: Beyond commercial breaks and content ratings

A/B/C stories and runners, character arcs, conflict and stakes

What is a "Beatment"?

ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. Write a BEATMENT (**10% of final grade**); email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by **6 p.m. on Tuesday, February 9**.
2. Read beatments and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 4: Thursday, February 11, 2021

Workshopping pilot stories

The world of your Pilot - setting and supporting cast

Franchise and story ideas: What would this series look like?

Discuss how BEATS fit into each ACT and strong ACT BREAKS

Discuss "carding" beats

Breaking into Group A and Group B

ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. BOTH GROUPS prepare cards for in-class pitches.
2. GROUP A plan to pitch pilots in class

Week 5: Thursday, February 18, 2021

Group A pitches their pilots with cards

Analyze and restructure as needed

Expanding a BEATMENT into a Pilot OUTLINE

ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. GROUP B revise cards as necessary, plan to pitch pilots in class.
2. GROUP A to turn beatments into OUTLINES (**15% of final grade**); email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by **6 p.m. on Tuesday, February 23**.
3. After submitting outlines, GROUP A should begin writing TEASERS and FIRST ACTS in anticipation of their next deadline on **Tuesday, March 2**.

Week 6: Thursday, February 25, 2021

Group B pitches their pilots with cards

Analyze and restructure as needed

Discuss relationship between outlines and script

ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. GROUP A to continue writing TEASERS and FIRST ACTS; email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by **6 p.m. on Tuesday, March 2**.
2. GROUP B to turn beatments into OUTLINES (**15% of final grade**); email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by 6 p.m. on Tuesday, March 2.
3. After submitting outlines, GROUP B should begin writing TEASERS and FIRST ACTS in anticipation of their next deadline on **Tuesday, March 9**.
4. Read Group A's pages and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 7: Thursday, March 4, 2021

Workshopping Group A TEASERS AND FIRST ACTS

ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. GROUP B to write TEASERS and FIRST ACTS; email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by 6 p.m. on Tuesday, March 9.
2. GROUP A to revise TEASERS and FIRST ACTS; start ACTS TWO and THREE.
3. Read Group B's pages and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 8: Thursday, March 11, 2021

Workshopping Group B TEASERS AND FIRST ACTS
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. GROUP A to complete ACTS TWO and THREE; email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by 6 p.m. on Tuesday, March 16.
2. GROUP B to revise TEASERS and FIRST ACTS; start ACTS TWO and THREE.
3. Read classmates' work and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 9: Thursday, March 18, 2021

Workshopping Group A ACTS TWO and THREE
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. GROUP A to revise ACTS TWO and THREE, begin ACTS FOUR.
2. GROUP B to complete ACTS TWO and THREE; email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by 6 p.m. on Tuesday, March 23.
3. Read classmates' work and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 10: Thursday, March 25, 2021

Workshopping Group B ACTS TWO and THREE
ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. GROUP B to revise ACTS TWO and THREE, begin ACTS FOUR.
2. GROUP A to complete ACTS FOUR; email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by 6 p.m. on Tuesday, March 30.
3. Read classmates' work and prepare feedback for next class

Week 11: Thursday, April 1, 2021

Workshopping Group A ACTS FOUR

Discuss series bibles

ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. GROUP B to complete ACTS FOUR; email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by 6 p.m. on Tuesday, April 6.
2. GROUP A to revise ACTS FOUR, complete FIRST DRAFT of pilot **(20% of final grade)** and email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by 6 p.m. on **Sunday, April 11 <--PLEASE NOTE THE EARLY DEADLINE!**
3. Read classmates' work and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 12: Thursday, April 8, 2021

Workshopping Group B ACTS FOUR

Discuss series bibles

ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT WEEK:

1. GROUP B to revise ACTS FOUR, complete FIRST DRAFT of pilot **(20% of final grade)** and email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by **6 p.m. on Sunday, April 25 <--PLEASE NOTE THE DEADLINE!**
2. Read Group A first drafts and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 13: Thursday, April 15, 2021

Workshopping Group A FIRST DRAFTS

ASSIGNMENTS FOR NEXT TWO WEEKS:

1. Group A to re-read current drafts and draft a statement/goals chart (**5% of final grade**) for your second draft; email as a PDF to INSTRUCTOR ONLY by 6 p.m. Tuesday, April 20.
2. Group A to commence work on second draft and series bible.
3. Group B to revise ACTS FOUR, complete FIRST DRAFTS of pilot (**20% of final grade**) and email as a PDF to instructor and classmates by **6 p.m. on Sunday, April 25** **<--PLEASE NOTE THE DEADLINE!**
4. Read Group B first drafts and prepare feedback for next class.

Week 14: Thursday, April 22, 2021 - WELLNESS DAY/ NO CLASS

NOTE: This week Zoom office hours will be held on both Wednesday and Friday from 2-4 p.m.

Week 15: Thursday, April 29, 2021

Workshopping Group B FIRST DRAFTS

FINAL ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Group B to re-read current drafts and draft a statement/goals chart (**5% of final grade**) for your second draft; email as a PDF to INSTRUCTOR ONLY no later than 6 p.m. Wednesday, May 5.
2. Group B to commence work on second draft and series bible
3. Both groups should polish, proofread and email second draft (**20% of final grade**) and series bible (**10% of final grade**) as PDFs to instructor **by 6 p.m. on Tuesday, May 11.**

Classes end: April 30, 2021

Polished SECOND DRAFT and SERIES BIBLE due via email by 6 p.m. on Tuesday, May 11.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**Incompletes:**

This option is applicable strictly after the twelfth week of classes. The only acceptable reasons for taking an incomplete in the course are personal illness or family emergency. Students must inform the professor before the final assignment and present verifiable evidence in order for an alternative make-up plan to be constructed.

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/ssaa 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 removed from the Zoom meeting pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.

PLEASE NOTE:

EVEN THOUGH IT MAY BE A WHILE BEFORE ANY OF US SET FOOT ON CAMPUS, FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE STILL NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX.

FOR NOW, PLEASE FEEL FREE TO DRINK NON-WATER BEVERAGES AND/OR DISCREETLY EAT A SNACK OF YOUR CHOICE DURING OUR ZOOM CLASS, BUT PLEASE MUTE YOUR MICROPHONE IF IT'S PARTICULARLY CRUNCHY OR SLURPY.