

**School of Cinematic Arts**  
**Writing Division**  
**CTWR 519a: Thesis in Television Drama**

Instructor: DARA RESNIK  
Class Schedule: Mondays, 7:00-10:00pm  
Class Location: SCA 258  
Office Hours: Flexible  
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**Course Objective:**

My objective for these Monday night masked gatherings is to create an environment where you can actively engage in the craft of breaking, outlining, and writing a pilot just like we do in real-life writers' rooms. You will also practice the delicate art of note-giving and note-receiving. If I do my job right, you will leave this course, and USC, with a strong 60-page television drama pilot sample and, more importantly, you will have mastered reading and discussing one another's work with respect and kindness.

**Course Description:**

So what's awesome for me about this gig is that I was once you. I mean, not exactly you-you, I'm still me and you're still you, but I attended grad school at USC, sold my Stark thesis script pretty much right out of the gate... and then spent several more years scraping by before I was making a living writing full-time. More on that as we go.

What I learned about writing at USC has been invaluable to me, almost as invaluable as everything I was taught about note-giving and note-receiving. During my years as a staffer, I constantly turned to those skills in order to effectively take notes from showrunners and executives. Now that I'm a showrunner, I turn to those skills again, this time to ensure that the notes I give my writers inspire them to get me the pages I need.

My favorite classes at USC were malleable. If we weren't spending enough time on a topic, we stayed with it, and if it felt like we were mired in something unimportant, we moved on. This syllabus is merely a guideline. As my daughter's preschool put it, this class is "student-led, teacher-guided."

The course is primarily structured as a workshop, which requires writing your own pages and reading/commenting on those of your peers. You'll also learn how to break story, outline, write and then rewrite in practice, and just as importantly, you'll learn how to give and take notes simply by doing.

Writing matters. Words matter. They are the product of your voice. As the Foo Fighters' Dave Grohl so wonderfully put it in his 2013 keynote speech at SXSW:

“What matters most is that it's YOUR VOICE. Cherish it. Respect it. Nurture it. Challenge it. Stretch it and scream until it's f\*cking gone. Because every human being is blessed with at least that, and who knows how long it will last . . .”

I like to think of this course as a place where you start to discover your voice. You graduate next year. I hope this class is a big step toward finding the voice that will carry you into your first jobs in the business and way beyond.

### **Course Reading:**

None. I'll send a few articles here and there. The best free screenwriting resource on the web, however is:

Johnaugust.com and his associated ScriptNotes podcast. If we're lucky, he will be a class guest.

### **Grading Criteria:**

Pages will be due to the group via e-mail, NO LATER THAN 12pm the Sunday before class. I'm a New Yorker. I do not tolerate lateness. I think it's rude and it devalues others' time (unless it's me, in which case I will be highly apologetic). As you can see below, I will be considering “punctuality” when grading you. That includes deadlines and in person. Obviously, I will make exceptions for serious personal drama. (As long as you tell me in the form of a pitch. Kidding. Kind of.)

I don't want to grade you. It's the part of this gig that least excites me, but it's a necessary evil for fancy-shmancy film school.

Participation/Attendance/Punctuality:	10%
Enthusiasm/Note-giving:	10%
Outline:	25%
Weekly pages:	25%
Final Pilot:	30%

You'll note that just by handing in your work on time, showing up to class, making yourself heard, and being a decent human about it all, you'll start with a solid base grade.

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. Please?

In the real world, people will judge you for typos. You don't want that.

**Writing Division Attendance Policy:**

Students are expected be on time and prepared for each class. Two unexcused absences will result in your grade being lowered by one full point (ex: A to a (A-).

IN COVID TIMES, NOT FEELING WELL IS A TOTALLY VALID EXCUSE. DO NOT COME TO CLASS SICK.

*I'M GONNA SAY THAT AGAIN: DO NOT SHOW UP SICK, OR I WILL DISMISS EVERYONE AND NOBODY WILL HAVE CLASS THAT WEEK BECAUSE YOU SHOWED UP SICK IN A GLOBAL PANDEMIC. GOT IT?*

A third unexcused absence will result in your grade being lowered another full point (ex: B to a (B-). Your grade will be lowered by one point for every absence after. **Two late arrivals equates to one full absence.**

In order for absence to be excused the student must have approval and provide documentation at the next attended class session.

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 must miss class please contact me prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

**The basic gist is be responsible about absences and lateness and you won't be penalized. This is a practical policy, with real-world analogies to how a writer ought to go about canceling or pushing meetings and pitches.**

**Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:**

Please keep your cell phone off during class. If you have a child, or you caretake for a family member/friend, I can obviously make exceptions, but please discuss with me.

Laptops may be open for note-taking, but if I find you surfing the web, checking e-mail, or doing just about anything that isn't for class, I will consider that class an absence for you.

### **Class Schedule:**

Week 1: What are we doing here? How do I find my voice?

The first question is both existentialism and reading through this syllabus, plus doing some fun creative writing exercises.

I want to get a general idea of what interests you, and what ideas you may be leaning towards. Preferably, you haven't yet decided what to write. I want us to zero in on it together. We'll also be discussing how much you currently know about various teleplay structures – four acts, six acts, act breaks, and, thanks to streaming, no breaks at all.

We will do a few writing exercises, including a visit to the following website to answer one of these 10 questions in one page:

<http://www.accidentalcreative.com/creating/10-questions-that-will-help-you-find-your-voice>

Whether the script you write for this class is based on something that happened in your life, or something that happens in a galaxy far, far away the most important thing you bring to your work, and your critiques of others' work is YOU. Your perspective. If you can hone in on what inspires you, the whole writing thing, in fact the whole life thing, will be a lot easier. We may start to practice-break an episode of TV.

**Assignment for week 2:** Three ideas for your pilot. These can be in the form of loglines or as long as a few sentences each.

Week 2: We'll discuss your ideas and try to hone in on which one you should be developing further. I'll give you a super fun lecture on HOW TO PITCH. I have very specific thoughts on this. If there's time, we'll continue practice-breaking, and discuss interesting (and uninteresting) characters, and what kind of protagonist can carry several seasons of a series.

**Assignment for week 3:** Choose an idea to expand into a pitch based on the HOW TO PITCH document I send out.

Week 3: Pitches/discussion of the pitches. If you feel like you picked the wrong idea on which to focus your energy this semester, you can still change your mind. We'll be following up pitches with The Big Questions: Will this idea be a

good place for me to find my voice? What is interesting to me? Will what's interesting to me be interesting to others? (Cheat sheet: the answer, IMHO, to the latter question, is usually "yes.")

We'll be starting to learn the craft of note-giving and note-receiving. The most important thing is that the writers to whom you are speaking leave the room enthusiastic about making changes that will strengthen their scripts.

*Split into A and B groups for outlining and drafting.*

**Assignment for week 4:** Read the outlines I email you. Bonus points for handing in more than half your outline this week. Extra bonus-bonus points for handing in a rough draft of the whole darn thing. Team A e-mails 5-15 pages of outline to professor and classmates by the Sunday following class at noon.

Week 4: The Outline. We'll discuss the outlines in progress, why outlines are important, the different ways to outline, how to note outlines, and I'll prescribe the cure for outline-itis. If your idea is still not working, it's not too late to change your mind.

More story breaking, in case we didn't finish.

More Big QUESTIONS: What's a scene? What's it doing there? How do I write one that's interesting?

**Assignment for week 5:** Team B e-mails 5-15 pages of outline to professor and classmates by the Sunday following class at noon. Team A starts writing based on outline feedback or finishes outlining. Come next week with your favorite opening scenes from aired, existing pilots and be ready to explain what is great about them. We will discuss what makes a strong opening for a pilot and why that's so important.

Week 5: Outline-itis. We'll discuss the outlines, and get ready to write our pilots. Since you'll likely be starting work at the beginning (though some writers start with scenes in the middle of their scripts, and you are more than welcome to do so), we'll be discussing the best opening scenes you sent in and some that I happen to love.

Workshop — Team A first acts.

**Assignment for week 6:** Team B e-mails 10 pages (ideally teaser into first act) to professor and classmates by the Sunday following class at noon. Team A continues re- writing based on new outlines and class feedback.

Week 6: We'll discuss your first five pages and continue to learn how to give and take constructive criticism.

Workshop — Team B first acts.

**Assignment for week 7:** Team A addresses notes (good practice) AND e-mails another 10 pages (first act into second) to professor and classmates by the Sunday following class at noon. Team B continues re-writing based on class feedback.

Week 7: The trick to these next few weeks (and really, key in the life of any writer) is knowing when to “kill your darlings.” (Yes, that’s a terrible real-world Hollywood term that we’ll discuss), and knowing when to discard a note and stick to your vision.

Workshop — Team A scripts.

**Assignment for week 8:** Team B addresses notes (good practice) AND e-mails another 10 pages (first act into second) to professor and classmates by the Sunday following class at noon. Team A continues re-writing based on class feedback.

Week 8: A deeper discussion about characters, character paradoxes, and character arcs (I really hate that “arc” word, but nothing else quite describes it).

Workshop — Team B scripts.

**Assignment for week 9:** Team A e-mails another 10 pages (second act and onward) to professor and classmates by the Sunday before the end of spring break at noon. Team B continues writing based on class feedback.

Week 9: Theme

Discussion: What is your show trying to say? Why does it matter? Themes can vary from episode to episode and/or season to season. Depends on the show.

Workshop — Team A scripts

**Assignment for week 10:** Team B e-mails another 10 pages (second act and onward) to professor and classmates by the Sunday following class at noon. Team A continues re-writing based on class feedback... you should be almost done. I'll send some show bibles for funsies.

Week 10: We'll continue to workshop. There may be a guest speaker in there somewhere. Maybe more than one.

Workshop — Team B scripts

**Assignment for week 11:** Team A e-mails another 10 pages (second act and onward) to professor and classmates by the Sunday following class at noon. Team B continues writing based on class feedback.

Week 11: Specificity vs. universality in your writing. The magical combo is both.

Workshop - Team A scripts

**Assignment for week 12:** Team B e-mails another 10 pages (second act and onward) to professor and classmates by the Sunday following class at noon. Team B continues writing based on class feedback.

Week 12: Plotting the stories beyond the pilot. How to think about and break your first season and beyond. Griding and other fun tools.

Workshop - Team B scripts

**Assignment for week 13:** Team A e-mails another 10 pages (second act and onward) to professor and classmates by the Sunday following class at noon. Team B continues writing based on class feedback.

Week 13: **Assignment for week 14:** Team B e-mails another 10 pages (second act and onward) to professor and classmates by the Sunday following class at noon. Team B continues writing based on class feedback. ***Everyone should be rounding the bases toward home...***

Week 14: **Assignment for week 14:** Team A e-mails another 10 pages (second act and onward) to professor and classmates by the Sunday following class at noon. Team B continues writing based on class feedback. ***Everyone should be rounding the bases toward home...***

Week 15/Final Project: For the final, you're expected to hand in a finished pilot.

### **Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**

**Sorry, folks, someone else wrote this, but IT'S IMPORTANT. PLEASE READ IT.**

#### **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 Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* <https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in

SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/departments/departments-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage [sarc@usc.edu](mailto:sarc@usc.edu) describes reporting options and other resources.

### **Support Systems**

A number of USC's schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* [http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home\\_index.html](http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html)

provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu/> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

### **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**