

USC School of Cinematic Arts
John Wells Division of Writing for Screen & Television

PITCHING 101
PITCHING THE FILM AND TELEVISION SERIES:
HOW TO SELL YOUR STORY AND YOURSELF

CTWR 555 – Section 19296
Tuesdays – 7:00 to 9:50pm
Spring 2022 Semester

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DA: Brittany Bookbinder
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Office Hours by appointment.

PLEASE NOTE: Due to the unique and personal nature of learning to pitch, students should make every effort to be on-camera for the duration of any or all online/remote class sessions.

Course Description:

Any working Hollywood writer will tell you that they often have to spend as much time *talking* about what they're writing as they do actually writing it. And that's because a critical tool in any successful TV or screenwriter's belt is the ability to creatively and succinctly sell their stories and themselves to those in a position to pay for both.

This introductory class is designed to educate students on the basic why's and how's of pitching for features and television, whether in person or in virtual meetings.

Through analysis and application of basic verbal storytelling skills, subtle techniques of directed conversation and self-marketing, as well as carefully identifying what makes each of them unique as a commodity in a talent-driven town—students will acquire a new and crucial level of confidence in the pitching process—ultimately helping them become as proficient on the “stage” as they are on the page.

Drawing on the instructor's personal and professional experiences writing for the large and small screen, as well as that of other accomplished guests working in both mediums, this course will work toward four structured goals:

1. How to pitch yourself in a general and/or project specific meeting and leave the most memorably favorable impression.

2. How to pitch a dramatic or comedic feature in twenty minutes or less; including major protagonists, antagonists, basic plot-line, character arcs, and compelling set-pieces—then anticipate and answer detailed questions from the class about their film.
3. How to pitch a dramatic or comedic television series in twenty minutes or less; including premise, characters, pilot story overview, series arc, and episodic ideas— then anticipate and answer detailed questions from the class about their series.
4. Completing their choice of the above before a panel of experienced writers, directors, producers, and executives with questions and commentary—as a final project.

Meeting Information:

The course will be held one night a week for three hours. The first half will be devoted to a discussion of topics and techniques further detailed in the course content section of this syllabus. The second half will focus on student application and demonstration of those skills discussed; with analysis and critique from the instructor and class as a whole.

Pre-requisites: All students must have completed one course from the following list: CTWR 305, 415b, 514b, or 533b.

Required Texts:

“Film School: The True Story of a Midwestern Family Man Who Went to the World’s Most Famous Film School, Fell Flat on His Face, Had a Stroke, and Sold a Television Series to CBS” by Steve Boman.

"Pitching Hollywood: How to Sell Your TV and Movie Ideas" by Jonathan Koch, Robert Kosberg, and Tanya Meurur Norman.

Students will also be asked to review recognizably produced films and/or series in order to summarize and pitch them to the class as an exercise.

Evaluation of Student Performance:

Class Participation: 10%

Class Pitching Experience: 40%

Final Pitching Project: 50%

Per Writing Division policy, the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:

A	100% to 94%	A-	93% to 90%
B+	89% to 87%	B	86% to 83%
B-	82% to 80%	C+	79% to 77%
C	76% to 73%	C-	72% to 70%
D+	69% to 67%	D	66% to 63%
D-	62% to 60%	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.

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:

Laptops may be used for the taking of notes only.
No cellphone use is permitted during class.

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 will hold up the business of the class. Please make your best effort to be on time.

If you have a conflict that will cause you to miss class, you need to secure the instructor's approval of that absence in advance of the class. 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. In addition, due to current Covid protocols, if you are feeling ill, without time to test before class, please notify your instructor, do not attend class and get a test. If you test positive, inform your instructor and quarantine for the Health Department's designated period of time.

If you miss class without informing your instructor, it will be considered an unexcused absence. Unexcused absences can lower your final grade for the course. 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.

Course Content (summarized by class meeting)

Week 1 • 01/11/22 • Introduction

Introductions: Who we are and why we are here – with a beginning eye toward how to quickly pitch ourselves from the moment we walk in the room—real or virtual, (i.e., the instructor “pitches” himself).

In-class Team Exercise: Break room into pairs for ten minutes of personal background conversation, then have them pitch each other as the perfect writer for a fictional project created by the instructor. Discuss with each student how they might have sold themselves differently for the job.

Course overview – objectives, assignments, grading, etc. Do writers have to pitch? Do writers have to eat? Are all pitches the same? Are all stories or writers the same? Whether pitching for features or TV (in this class, both) practice almost always makes perfect. Are there tricks or formulas that can be applied to pitching? What’s a Cereal Box pitch? A short pitch? A full-length pitch?

Discussion of Final Project: Pitching a series or film to the class and professional guests (some of whom will also share their pitch stories throughout the semester).

Assignment: Re-watch your favorite film and prepare a written paragraph summary (*Cereal Box Pitch*) that you can verbalize for the class.

Week 2 • 01/18/22 • Owning the Room, Whether It’s Real Or Remote

Discussion: Doing your homework. Knowing in advance who your audience is and how to put that knowledge to work. How to make a personal connection/impression, segue into a pitch, and rise above the din. How can a writer walk in and immediately own the real or virtual room?

In-Class Exercise: Students have a one-on-one, mock general meeting with the Professor while their classmates observe, and will present their Favorite Film Cereal Box Pitch as a part of that conversation.

Assignment: Extend your favorite film summary in writing into a compelling conversational Mini Pitch (5 minutes min/max). Be prepared to discuss the genre, premise, tone, theme, and basic plot in three act structure. Identify primary characters, their arcs, and at least two compelling set pieces.

Week 3 • 01/25/22 • Less is More

Discussion: The biggest difference between a script and a pitch? Two hours. How to identify the key elements of a film, its plot, and characters and distill them into a compelling conversational pitch. Is pacing important? How much is too much?

Student present their Favorite Film 5 Minute Mini Pitches.

First Assignment: Select an original feature idea you have either already written or would like to write. Prepare a paragraph summary (*cereal box pitch*) you can verbalize for the next class.

Week 4 • 02/01/22 • Preparation is Key

Discussion: How to prepare for a pitch. Why it's important to be "off-book" in person. What are the key elements of delivering a successful virtual pitch? How do you anticipate and answer questions about your project in advance? What happens when a good pitch goes bad?

Students present their Original Film Cereal Box Pitches.

Assignment: Extend your original film summary in writing into a compelling conversational Mini Pitch (5 minutes min/max). Be prepared to discuss the genre, premise, tone, theme, and basic plot in three act structure. Identify primary characters, their arcs, and at least two compelling set pieces.

Week 5 • 02/08/22 • Show and Tell

Discussion: Are props or visual aids necessary in a pitch? Why or why not? Are the rules different with a virtual pitch? Should leave-behinds be left behind? If not, then what are they there for?

Students present their 5 minute Original Film Mini Pitches. Questions are encouraged by the class.

Assignment: Using questions asked by the class, adjust and amend your brief original film pitch into a compelling and conversational full-length pitch (10 minutes min/max). Be prepared to discuss the genre, premise, tone, theme, and basic plot in three act structure. Identify primary characters, their arcs, and at least two compelling set pieces. Prepare an opening personalized "ramp."

Class will be split in half and a coin tossed to determine which half presents the following week.

Week 6 • 02/15/22 • The Feature Pitch: Part One

First half of the students present their 10 minute full-length Original Film pitches. Pitches are analyzed and discussed by the class and instructor.

Week 7 • 02/22/22 • The Feature Pitch: Part Two

Second half of the students present their full-length 10 minute Original Film pitches. Pitches are analyzed and discussed by the class and instructor.

Assignment: Prepare for next week's guest speaker introduction.

Week 8 • 03/01/22 • GUEST SPEAKER: Randi Mayem Singer

Award-winning Motion Picture and Television Writer (MRS. DOUBTFIRE, JACK & JILL, ALVIN & THE CHIPMUNKS, MAD ABOUT YOU, INVISIBLE WOMEN) will discuss her career and how pitching has presented unique challenges and opportunities.

Discussion: How does pitching for features differ from pitching for television?

First Assignment: Select a favorite series idea you have enjoyed over the years. Prepare a written Cereal Box Pitch as if the series is your own which you can verbalize for the next class.

Week 9 • 03/08/22 • Small Screen vs. Big Screen

Discussion: What makes a series pitch different from a feature pitch?

Students present their Favorite Series Cereal Box Pitches.

Assignment: Select an original series idea you have either already written or would like to write. Prepare a written cereal box pitch you can verbalize for the next class.

Week 10 • 03/15/22 • NO CLASS – SPRING RECESS**Week 11 • 03/22/22 • Pitching a Series Concept**

Discussion: How much information is necessary for pitching an original series? What are the basic components of a successful pitch?

Students present their Original Series Cereal Box Pitches.

Assignment: Extend your original series summary into an original series Mini Pitch (5 minutes min/max); including premise and tone, major characters, and basic pilot story.

Week 12 • 03/29/22 • More is More

Discussion: How do you demonstrate that a series concept is capable of supporting more than one season's worth of episodes?

Students present their Original Series 5 minute Mini Pitches.

Assignment: Using questions asked by the class, amend and extend your original series overview into a full-length pitch (10 minutes min/max), which also includes a minimum of three episodic ideas and an opening personalized ramp.

Class will be split in half and a coin tossed to determine which half presents the following week.

Week 13 • 04/05/22 • The Series Pitch: Part One

First half of the students present their 10 minute Original Series full-length pitches. Pitches are analyzed and discussed by the class and instructor.

Week 14 • 04/12/22 • The Series Pitch: Part Two

Second half of the students present their 10 minute Original Series full-length pitches. Pitches are analyzed and discussed by the class and instructor.

Week 15 • 04/19/22 • GUEST SPEAKER: Tim Minear

Award-winning television showrunner, creator, writer, and director (9-1-1, 9-1-1 LONE STAR, DRIVE, WONDER FALLS, FIREFLY, AMERICAN HORROR STORY, X-FILES) will discuss his career and how pitching has presented unique challenges and opportunities.

Assignment: Prepare to re-pitch both your Original Feature and Original Series Cereal Box Pitches, then declare which project you'd like to pitch as your final class project.

Week 16 • 04/26/22 • Choices, Choices

Students will make a last "pitch" to the class and instructor about which project they've chosen to present as their final project before a panel of Hollywood

professionals—their full-length original feature or original series concept. Lingering issues to be addressed will be identified and discussed.

PLEASE NOTE THAT PITCHING 101 FINALS TAKE PLACE OVER TWO CONSECUTIVE NIGHTS. ALL STUDENTS MUST BE PRESENT FOR BOTH NIGHTS, REGARDLESS OF WHEN YOU PITCH.

THERE WILL BE NO CLASS ON TUESDAY, MAY 3RD – BECAUSE IT FALLS ON THE LAST OFFICIAL STUDY DAY. THEREFORE, PLEASE NOTE THAT FINALS WILL TAKE PLACE ON WEDNESDAY, MAY 4TH AND THURSDAY, MAY 5TH.

IF YOU SEE CONFLICTS IN YOUR SCHEDULE—PLEASE NOTIFY PROFESSOR CALLAWAY AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE IN THE SEMESTER. LAST MINUTE EXCUSES WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.

Week 17 • 05/04/22 • Course Final: Part One

First half of the students present their 10 minute Original Feature or Series pitches. Pitches are analyzed and discussed by the Guest Panel and instructor.

GUEST PANEL MAY INCLUDE: Writer-director Brad Silberling (*Casper, City of Angels, Land of the Lost, Jane The Virgin*), Actor/Producer Amy Brenneman (*Private Practice, Judging Amy, Heat*), Agent Kevin Crotty (*ICM*), Writer-Producer Bill Prady (*Big Bang Theory, Gilmore Girls, Dharma & Greg*), Producer Mark Burg (*Saw 1-7, Lottery Ticket, Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Two & A Half Men*), Director/Producer Paris Barclay (*Station 19, Pitch*)

Week 17 • 05/05/22 • Course Final: Part Two

Second half of the students present their 10 minute Original Feature or Series pitches. Pitches are analyzed and discussed by the Guest Panel and instructor.

GUEST PANEL MAY INCLUDE: Writer-producer Matt Nix (*Turner & Hooch, Burn Notice, The Gifted*), Writer-producer Alexa Junge (*Friends, United States of Tara, Big Love*), TV Exec Betsy Beers (*Shondaland*), Producer Mace Neufeld (*The Omen, Hunt For Red October, Patriot Games, Invictus*), Writer-Producer Mike Schiff (*Fam, Grounded for Life, 3rd Rock From the Sun*), Actor/Director Eriq LaSalle (*ER, 24, Law & Order*)

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