

## THESIS IN HALF HOUR TELEVISION COMEDY

CTWR 517a

Section #19352

(4.0 Units)

Fall 2022

**Instructor:** F. J. Pratt (email: [fjpratt@usc.edu](mailto:fjpratt@usc.edu))

**Class Schedule:** Tuesdays 1:00PM – 3:50PM

**Class Location:** TBD

**Office Hours:** I'm always available. Either in person or that Zoom thing.

Each Fall, sitcom TV series Writer/Creators, not unlike Emperor Penguins, flock to their breeding grounds. In the case of writers, it's the Networks, broadcast, cable and pay....and now streaming providers (i.e. Netflix, Hulu, Amazon). The "Pitch" initiates the pilot season. A favorable response and sale begins a nearly year long process that is not unlike giving birth, with all the accompanying pain and joy. (NOTE: I've never given birth to a child so I acknowledge this is a frivolous analogy from me.) The pilots that make it through and become series are invariably the fittest... although not always the finest. A successful comedy series is built on a strong foundation of Character Conflict, World and Premise. This three cornered foundation should ideally be present in the initial pitch and continue to develop through the pilot story to the script that promises an intriguing series with identifiable characters and a relatable theme. Half hour comedies must brave their own particular competitive climate. Only the strong...and the funny survive.

**COURSE GOALS:** To simulate the TV Development season and create the pilot for a potential half hour comedy series from idea and pitch through story and first draft. Students, working in a collegial "Writer's Room" atmosphere, will be encouraged to generate ideas, characters and themes that reflect aspects of their own life experience, thus building a personal connection to the proposed series. The effect of comedy is laughter, but the cause is human conflict, plain and simple.

**COURSE OBJECTIVE:** The completion of a first draft and polish for a half-hour comedy series, and a series arc (episode bible) that will be re-written during the second portion of the Thesis course (Spring Semester) from colleague, instructor, Thesis Committee, Industry expert and actor performance notes.

### **SUGGESTED READING:**

The TV Writer's Handbook by Ellen Sandler

The Art of Dramatic Writing by Lajos Egri

Scripts... read, lots and lots of produced scripts!

**GRADING:** All weekly assignments should be uploaded to our Google Drive by **SUNDAY at 3PM.** This will give us enough time to read everyone's work and be ready to discuss.

The Grading Criteria is as follows--

Participation in the Writing Room Process: 10%  
Character and World Assignments: 10%  
(Week 2 assignment 5%--Week 6 assignment 5%)  
Pitches--Series Idea and Pilot Story: 10%  
Story Beat Sheet: 15%  
First Draft of Pilot: 25%  
Final Draft of Pilot: 30%

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%

*(I promise, no more math!)*

### **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 equal 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. If you have an emergency and must miss class, please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

**LAPTOP POLICY:** Laptops, a vital writing tool, are encouraged in class. Cruising the Internet and instant messaging, etc. are not. This Writer's Room is an "all for one and one for all" atmosphere. To turn your attention to anything but the work at hand is disrespectful, not to mention un-professional. A warning will be given for the first such infraction. The next will result in a loss of one grade. Needless to say the same rule applies to smart phones.

*If and I mean IF, we ever go back to our science fiction world, here's some fun online etiquette, known as...*

## **NETIQUETTE**

I know you already know all of this, but just in case...

- 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. I will be in top hat and tails.
- If you have a question during the lecture, use the Chat function. (I will direct my attention to the question and answer it with intellect and humor)
- 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 I know you want to speak.
- 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 writing cohort. Of course, I will be adding my annoying two cents.

## **CLASS SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNMENTS**

**(NOTE:** Class Schedule and syllabus is subject to change by Instructor to accommodate class time and scheduled guests)

**Week #1 Aug. 23rd – Introduction** - Plumbing our dysfunctional lives for comic character and theme. Analysis and comparison of current sitcom pilots. (*Abbott Elementary vs. What We Do In The Shadows*). The Business of the Sitcom.

**Assignment:** Provide a brief sketch of two series ideas and description of central characters in each.

**Week #2 Aug. 30<sup>th</sup> - Pitch---**Review and discussion of character driven series ideas.  
(NOTE:) Students will choose the series idea they want to develop.

Assignment: Prepare a brief Character and World description of series idea and ten words that descriptively define the main protagonist.

**Week #3 Sept. 6<sup>th</sup> - Breaking Ground---**Review and discuss Week #2 assignment  
Break class into A&B sections for future assignment designation and review.

Assignment: Prepare a series pilot story to pitch and discuss. Group A will present in Week 4.

(**NOTE:** Students will make an individual appointment with Instructor to discuss their project.)

**Week #4 Sept 13<sup>th</sup> - Structure and Theme---**Discovering the Controlling Theme of the pilot, AKA Finding the Melody. Review and discuss Group A pilot stories.

Assignment: Group A will prepare a story beat sheet. (Model provided)  
Group B will present pilot stories in Week 5.

**Week #5 Sept. 20<sup>th</sup> Conflict from Character---**Examining the fault lines of Character and how they lead to the “funny”. Review and discuss Group B pilot stories..

Assignment: Group B will prepare a story beat sheet. Group A will present pilot story beat sheets in Week 6.

**Week #6 Sept. 27<sup>th</sup> - The B Story---**Discussion of the use of subplots in the pilot story. Screen pilot of *Abbott Elementary*. Review and discuss Group A story beat sheets.

Assignment: All students will provide a chart of character relationships. (Model provided) Group B will present pilot story beat sheets in Week 7.

**Week #7 Oct. 4<sup>th</sup> - Exposition--**The artful use of exposition in sitcom. Screen pilot of *Barry*. Review and discuss Group B pilot story beat sheets and all character relationship charts.

Assignment: Both groups will begin writing Act 1 of their pilot. Group B will present Act 1 pages in Week 8.

**Week #8 Oct. 11<sup>th</sup> - Dilemma, Consequence, Resolution---**The three building blocks of the half hour story form. Screen the pilot of *Arrested Development*. Review and discuss Group B Act 1 pages.

Assignment: Group B will begin writing Act 2. Group A will present Act 1 pages in Week 9.

**Week #9 Oct. 18<sup>th</sup> - Obstacles---**Strengthening and heightening challenges to the Protagonist's goal. Read and discuss Group A Act 1.

Assignment---Group A will begin Act 2. Group B will present Act 2 in Week 10.

**Week #10 Oct. 25<sup>th</sup> - Earning the Resolution---**Exploring comic tension and catharsis. Screen the pilot of *Cheers*. (There's a reason this show has stood the test of time!) Read and discuss Group B Act 2.

Assignment: Group B will complete pilot. Group A will present Act 2 in Week 11.

**Week #11 Nov.1<sup>st</sup> - Character and More Character---**Exploring character as aspects of theme. Read and discuss Group A Act 2.

Assignment: Group A & B will deliver first draft of Pilot.

**Week #12 Nov. 8<sup>th</sup> - The Bible---**Exploring subsequent episodes of the comic series. Screen Episode #2 of *The Office*

Assignment: All students will create a rough bible of five future episodes ideas for their series. (Model provided)

**Weeks #13 - #14 Nov. 15<sup>th</sup> & 22<sup>nd</sup> Troubleshooting and the Re-Write -** The importance of re-examining the characters and story to enhance clarity, conflict, theme and brevity. Workshop first drafts.

Assignment: Both groups will write polish of pilot.

**Week #15 Nov. 29<sup>th</sup> - The Half Hour Industry** (You'll be dying to hear from people other than myself!) Guest Speaker: Howard Morris, creator, EP of "*Grace & Frankie*"

Assignment: Deliver final draft script. December 10<sup>th</sup>. You will have a couple of days to do a light pass on your script.

**(NOTE: MFA candidates will email their final draft to members of their MFA Thesis Committee by noon PST on December 14th.)**

### **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](http://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 class, on time! 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. It's the industry standard. 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!

**PLEASE NOTE:  
FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY  
INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX**