

**School of Cinematic Arts**  
**The John Wells Division of Writing for Screen and Television**  
**CTWR 539: Advanced Hour-Long Drama Series Pilot**

Instructor: Nicole Jefferson Asher

Section: 19447D

Schedule: Thursdays 7-10pm, SCA 362

Office Hours: By appointment only, please email me in advance.

Contact Info: [njieffer@usc.edu](mailto:njieffer@usc.edu)

**COURSE OBJECTIVE:**

To develop an hour-long dramatic television series and write a corresponding pilot.

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

This is an advanced course for students interested in pitching and developing an original, character driven dramatic TV series. This class will deepen your understanding of the drama development process as well as help hone your own original “voice”. By the end of the semester students will have completed a writer’s draft of an hour-long original pilot script as well as a mini bible for their first season.

**RECOMMENDED TEXT:**

STORY MAPS: TV DRAMA - THE STRUCTURE OF THE ONE HOUR TELEVISION PILOT by Daniel P. Calvisi

WRITING THE TV DRAMA SERIES - by Pamela Douglas.

THE TV WRITER’S WORKBOOK - by Ellen Sandler.

**WRITING DIVISION ATTENDANCE POLICY:**

Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class.

As per the Writing Division’s attendance policy: **You are allowed two absences per semester without it negatively impacting your grade.** Two late arrivals equate to 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.

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/or know you will miss class please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

If a student has an emergency and additional accommodations are needed, those accommodations will need to come through the USC Campus Support and Intervention (CSI) office. The Writing Division recommends the student and/or advocate contact CSI at 213-821-4710 and their home department adviser for additional support.

### **GRADING CRITERIA:**

- 10% Class participation, including oral and written commentary on classmates' work
- 10% Pilot Story Pitch
- 30% Pilot Outline
- 30% Completed Pilot Script
- 20% Series mini bible for Season 1

### **GRADING BREAKDOWN:**

A 100 to 94%    A- 93 to 90%    B+ 89% to 87%    B 86% to 83%    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%

### **PROFESSIONALISM:**

All written assignments are to be delivered as PDFs, attached to an email and sent to [njieffer@usc.edu](mailto:njieffer@usc.edu). Due dates will be announced during each class.

Please write your **Full Name, Assignment Name (i.e “Outline”, “Act One”, etc.) and Date on all assignments. Careful, meticulous proofreading is required on everything.** If an assignment contains more than three grammatical errors, you will be penalized. A sloppily proofed final script and/or bible will result in a reduced grade.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY/PRIVACY POLICY:**

What happens in the writers' room stays in the writers' room. Anything discussed in class — especially peers' ideas, writing, and personal information — is confidential and should not be repeated, tweeted, or posted about online. Please be kind and respect each other's privacy.

### **LAPTOP AND CELL PHONE POLICY:**

Phone calls and texting are considered disruptions and are not allowed in class. Laptops ARE allowed, but any activity that does not relate to class work is not allowed.

## **CLASS SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNMENTS:**

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

### **Week 1: Thursday, January 12th** – *Introduction / Overview.*

Overview of class / introduction to writing an episodic TV drama series.

Discussion of premise, character arcs, basic story structure and “world.” Review of Story Map Concept. (See handout)

#### **Assignment:**

1. Read an hour-long drama pilot script from the list given in class. Apply the “Story Map” for that script. **Email the professor your story map by Tuesday January 17th at 5pm. NO EXCEPTIONS.**
2. Prepare TWO SERIES PREMISE PITCHES to consider writing this semester. These must include main character, core conflict and some examples of potential storylines for each premise. Be prepared to verbally pitch these premises in class.

### **Week 2: Thursday, January 19th** – *Workshop series premise pitches.*

Through feedback and critique, the class will help each student narrow down their premise choices to one.

#### **Assignment:**

1. Complete a story map for your chosen idea.
2. In addition to the story map, please prepare a one-page beat sheet listing ten essential scenes your pilot story must have.

**Each student will verbally pitch their ideas to the class in Week 3.**

### **Week 3: Thursday, January 26th** – *Workshop pilot pitches.*

Students will pitch their ideas in class. Everyone will then be assigned to a writing group based on genres.

#### **Assignment:**

Group A – Outline the Teaser and Act One of your pilot.

Group B – Prepare your outlines of the Teaser and Act One to share week 5.

### **Week 4: Thursday, February 2<sup>ND</sup>** – *Discuss character introductions and exposition.*

Group A workshops their Outline Teaser and Act One.

#### **Assignment:**

Group A – Outline Act Two and Three of your pilot.

Group B – Prep your outline for Teaser and Act One to share week 5.

### **Week 5: Thursday, February 9<sup>th</sup>** – *Character introductions and exposition, pt 2.*

Group B workshops their Outline for Teaser and Act One.

Assignment:

Group B – Outline Act Two and Act Three of your pilot.

Group A – Prep your Outline for Acts Two and Three to share week 6.

**Week 6: Thursday, February 16<sup>th</sup>** - *Act structure and act outs.*

Group A workshops outlines for Acts Two and Three.

Assignment:

Group A – Outline Acts Four and Five of your pilot.

Group B – Prep Outlines for Act Two and Three of your pilot to share week 7.

**Week 7: Thursday February 23<sup>rd</sup>** – *Character arcs, stakes, escalation of tension.*

Group B workshops their Outlines for Act Two and Three.

Assignment:

Group B – Outline Act Four and Five of your pilot.

Group A – Prep Outline for Act Four and Five to share week 8.

**Week 8: Thursday, March 2<sup>nd</sup>** – *Revisions and notes.*

Group A workshops their Outline for Acts Four and Five.

Assignment:

Group A – Revise the entire outline.

Group B – Prep Outline for Act Four and Act Five to share week 9.

**Week 9: Thursday, March 9<sup>th</sup>**

Group B workshops Outlines for Act Four and Act Five.

Assignment: EVERYONE - revise the outline and start writing first half of your pilot - The Teaser, Act One and Act Two.

**Thursday, March 16<sup>th</sup> - SPRING BREAK - NO CLASS**

**Week 10: Thursday March 23<sup>rd</sup>** – *Scene work.*

Workshop Group A's Teaser, Act One and Act Two of your pilot.

Assignment:

Group A – Revise the Teaser, Act One and Act Two of your Pilot Teleplay based on notes. Continue writing second half of pilot.

Group B – Prep to workshop the first half of your Pilot next week.

**Week 11: Thursday, March 30<sup>th</sup>** – *Dialogue.*

Workshop Group B's Teaser, Act One and Act Two of pilot.

Assignment:

Group A –Revise / Finish first draft of your pilot.

Group B – Revise the Teaser, Act One and Act Two of your Pilot based on notes. Continue writing second half of pilot.

**Week 12: Thursday, April 6<sup>th</sup>** -

Workshop Group A's Act Three, Four and Five.

**Week 13: Thursday, April 13<sup>th</sup>** -

Workshop Group B's Act Three, Four and Five.

Assignment:

**Pens down, take a break - No pages due next week!**

**Week 14: Thursday, April 20<sup>st</sup>** – *Discuss pilot series bibles.*

Assignment: EVERYONE — work on your series bible. No pages due.

**Week 15: Thursday April 27<sup>th</sup>** – Last Day of Class.

Final workshop - students' choice. Workshop scenes, bible, or whatever you are struggling with.

**MINI BIBLE/ FINAL DRAFT PILOT DUE: MAY 5TH, 5pm.**

## 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” <https://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, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

### Support Systems:

*Student Counseling Services (SCS)* - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline* - 1-800-273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP)* - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>

*Sexual Assault Resource Center*

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: <http://sarc.usc.edu/>

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance* – (213) 740-5086

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://equity.usc.edu/>

*Bias Assessment Response and Support*

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs*

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. <http://dsp.usc.edu>

*Student Support and Advocacy* – (213) 821-4710

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>

*Diversity at USC*

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. <https://diversity.usc.edu/>

*USC Emergency Information*

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, <http://emergency.usc.edu>

*USC Department of Public Safety* – 213-740-4321 (UPC) and 323-442-1000 (HSC) for 24-hour emergency assistance or to report a crime. Provides overall safety to USC community. <http://dps.usc.edu>