

USC SCA CTPR 558– Advanced Producing Fall 2023

Section: 18687 2 Units

Instructor: Tom Jacobson

SA: Zizheng(Boris) Liu

Day/Time: Tuesdays **6pm-9pm SCA 204** Office Hours: By Appt

Course Description and Outline

This class defines and examines the role of the Feature & TV & Streaming/Digital Producer from inception of the idea to release/airing -- through development, selling, financing, packaging, production, and marketing.

The class provides a comprehensive overview of the opportunities and challenges in producing. The emphasis will be on feature, television and digital productions. We will explore the basic idea of what it means to be an effective producer, including strategies for acquiring IP and creating, researching, developing, pitching, executing and selling ideas. We will focus on the creative and collaborative aspects of producing as well as the importance of the entrepreneurial and business side.

The course will be a combination of lectures, project assignments, class presentations, guest speakers and open discussions with a Q&A format.

Guest speakers will include professional producers and other experts in the feature film, television, and digital media – managers, writers, directors, executives, marketers, etc., who will discuss their areas of expertise

Over the course of the semester, students will complete assignments that will be part of a class-long project to build a portfolio to use as a selling and marketing tool for an original project they choose to develop at the beginning of the course.

Suggested Reading and Supplementary Materials (more to follow):

Clearance & Copyright, 4th Edition. Everything You Need to Know for Film and Television by Michael C. Donaldson and Lisa A. Callif

The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers, 3rd Edition: by Vogler, Chris: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007

Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die by Chip Heath & Dan Heath

PROJECTS AND ASSIGNMENTS:

A number of assignments are part of the **final pitch packet**. Speaker questions, pitches and other weekly assignments are also included as part of your grade. Weekly assignments are due by noon on Tuesday before class.

- **THE FINAL PROJECT: “Package” a project to take to the marketplace.** You will be working on this throughout the semester. Each student will assemble a project portfolio, based on an original idea, or *available* underlying source material for any platform – film, television, digital or new media. *The final packet* will include:
 - Biography
 - Two-to-three-page synopsis / story summary
 - Executive Summary (must include logline, genre, suggested budget level, when and where you might shoot)
 - Packaging lists: cast, writers and directors
 - Marketing/sales/distribution plan (*including who you think the market is and how best to reach them, as well as the likely distribution partners*)
 - Financing plan/critical assumptions
 - Supporting visual pitch materials
- **Weekly assignment:** Each week one or more students will be assigned to prepare and present an in-depth report on interesting and relevant news from a variety of entertainment news sources. The report will be presented at the beginning of class.
- **Group collaboration:** The class will be separated into groups for assignments and presentations throughout the term. Each group will be assigned a TV pilot to read and analyze. Assignments based on the pilot script will include:
 - Two-page Coverage
 - Three-five minute in-class pitch
 - Creative analysis from the point of view of a buyer, comps
 - Mood board/look book, cast presentation
 - An additional group assignment will be to research and present an analysis of network and studio buyers.
- **Speaker Questions:** Students are expected to research speakers ahead of class and prepare 3-5 questions for them, which are due by the **Sunday** evening before the class visit by email to the instructor and SA. Submission of questions is mandatory. The depth of the questions will reflect the level of attention to research on the speakers.

Students should do their own research as well, including bios and articles on speakers, especially recent items. They should check out the Trades, Deadline Hollywood, IMDB, and LA and NY Times and, if time permits, look at the speakers’ latest work in film or TV.

Class participation:

Class participation is particularly important to the success of this class, in order to stimulate dynamic discussions amongst the students and with the guest speakers.

Participation includes engaging with guests in Q&A discussions, discussions with fellow students and instructors about the class topic and assignments.

Attendance will be taken for each class and tardiness, or absence will have a significant effect on your grade. We expect you to complete your assignments on time and be prepared for class. If you have issues with a deadline, please speak to us at least a week in advance of it.

You are expected to be in your seat promptly at the start of class and at the end of breaks. If you have an emergency and must miss class, please contact Tom or Chelsea no later than the morning of class.

Class discussion is strictly confidential. It should not be repeated without the guest's permission. Also, it is not appropriate for any student to solicit employment by or make submissions to guest speakers.

GUEST SPEAKERS ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE to accommodate their availability.

Class topics & the syllabus assignments may shift both to accommodate guest speaker and based on the subjects covered during the term.

Grading Criteria:

Attendance: see policy below

In Class Participation: 10%

Guest questions: 10%

Class TV Group Assignments 30%

News Reports: 5%

Final Assignment: 45%

Assignments will be evaluated both on the quality of the work and the ability to meet deadlines. ***Assignments should be uploaded to the class drive for that week. They are due by the start of that week's class on Tuesday evening.***

*Timeliness is essential as it is a professional requirement. **If your assignment is late, your grade will be lowered.***

Expectation of Professionalism:

All material is expected both to be turned in on time and in the proper format. Assignments will be critiqued and graded for grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, format mistakes, and typos. Please proofread your assignment prior to submission.

Production Division Attendance Policy:

Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Two unexcused absences will lower a student's grade by one full letter (ie: A becomes B). A third unexcused absence will result in a student's grade being lowered by one, additional full letter (ie: B becomes C). A student's grade will be lowered by one full letter for each additional unexcused absence. 2 late class arrivals equate to one full absence.

If you are going to miss class for illness or other emergencies, we want our SA to hear about at least a half-day (roughly 12 hours) in advance. This counts as an excused absence. Any other absence is unexcused. Any more than one unexcused absence will result in half a grade reduction for each absence. Being late twice (2x) equals one unexcused absence.

Required Preparation: Please prepare your professional biography and submit by the first class. Use whatever format you want. We will review standard bio samples and you will revise your bio as part of the class assignments. Also, start thinking about 2 ideas (at any stage) that you would be interested in developing for any screen.

WEEK 1, August 22, 2023: Introductions, Review of class-long project, Role of the producer

Introductions. Questions. Survey of class expectations. Discuss all assignments.

Weekly assignment: Each week one or two students will be assigned to present an in-depth report chosen by the instructor on interesting and relevant, entertainment news. Topics may also include the history and path to screen for a film or a TV series. The report will be presented to the class, should be concise and run approximately 10 minutes, and can include visuals such as a PPT to be projected. Depending on class size, students may be assigned to collaborate and present as pairs.

Following are some good sources for research into an assigned topic, though by no means all. There are many new media podcasts hosted by industry veterans: "KCRW's The Business" (podcast), Deadline.com, Variety, The Hollywood Reporter, The Wrap.

LA & NY Times (particularly "Company Town" in LA Times).

Slate, Salon, Indie wire, Redef.com (strong digital and media analysis newsletter, aggregator of articles – great resource).

NYT: The Corner Office (Leadership and Management...really great articles, occasional media focus), Box Office Mojo, The Numbers.

Some other industry podcasts: Scriptnotes: John August & Craig Mazin;

The Producer's Guide: Todd Garner.

Discussion of Final Assignment: "Package" a film to sell for a financier. You will be working on this throughout the semester. Your second class assignment will be to present two ideas *in logline form*, one of which will be chosen to be the project for which you will prepare a detailed presentation that is designed to be presented to potential financiers. Please choose an original idea, not one that's been sold or previously produced. Your idea

can be based on source material. *The material must be available, and you have must have begun the process to secure the rights.*

While not required, it's a good exercise to think of one film and one TV idea to present. Most importantly, the project ideas should be something that you care about and can see yourself developing in depth and strongly advocating.

Review required elements of Final Packet

The role of the Producer: What do they do? What makes a good/bad producer? What do the titles mean (Executive, Producer, Line Producer, Co-Producer, Associate Producer)? What is the difference between the titles in television and film? What buyers expect from producers. What are mandatory skills for different kinds of producers. Discussion of the collaborative process and what it really means for producers and the importance of networking.

Handout & discussion: *PGA code of credits, Bio samples, Logline guides*

In-class discussion on how to write a bio and a logline. What is an 'elevator pitch'.

Assignment: Develop 2 project ideas for next class to pitch as *logline / premise*. Revise your bio per class discussion and samples – who you are for the market, employers and publicity. No more than one page. Turn in next week. The bio will be included in your Final Packet.

WEEK 2, August 29, 2023: Presenting your Idea, Pitching to a buyer

In-class: *Logline / Premise Presentation*

The class will present their ideas in short form (not a pitch), after which each student will pick one idea to prepare as their final project.

Overview of pitching:

- Different types of pitches: TV/digital and film and how they differ.
- What to do before, during and after a pitch.
- What are the important elements of a pitch?
- How long should pitches be?
- What should I leave, if anything, behind in a pitch meeting?
- What are the memorable elements of the successful and unsuccessful pitches?
- What do I do if they "pass"? How to accept and give criticism.

Handouts – *Pitch guidelines.*

Reading list discussion, film literacy.

Assignment: Turn your chosen idea into a 3-minute pitch.

WEEK 3, September 5, 2023: Pitching, Finding great ideas

In-class: one-half of the class will present their ideas as 3-5 minutes pitches.

Ideas into scripts

- Discuss where great ideas come from the obvious to the not so obvious sources.
- How to choose the right platform for your idea.
- How to be sure that your Ideas are sticky.
- Evaluating the marketability of your ideas.
- Spec script vs. pitch.
- Networking with talent and representatives.

Pitching – continue discussion

- What are the important elements of a pitch?
- Using practice pitches to improve your idea.
- The ‘elevator’ pitch – essential story elements.

What makes an idea Stick?

Handout: Excerpt from *Made to Stick* sign about the “six principles of sticky ideas.”

Assignment: Coverage, pitching, evaluation exercise on a TV pilot. This is an ongoing assignment that will have several parts due over different weeks. The class will be divided into four-five groups. Each group will read and analyze a one-hour TV pilot. TV pilot scripts will be handed out this week in preparation for the first TV group assignment, *which is due on week 5*. See next week’s assignment for details.

WEEK 4, September 12, 2023. The Writing and Development Process

Guest speaker: *Producer: Jason Reed*

In-class: The second half of the class will present their final project ideas as 3-5 minute pitches.

How to turn an idea into a script.

FROM IDEA TO WRITER TO PITCH

Scripts/Writing Process:

- FINDING WRITERS, DIRECTORS, BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS
- How do I convey my idea to the writer?
- Can I protect my idea? How do I keep it from being stolen?
- How long should a treatment be?
- How long should it take a writer to do a 1) first draft 2) revision 3) polish?
- Is it customary to see pages?
- What if the script is not what I wanted?

Re-writing/Editing/Polishing

- How different should a rewrite be from the original?
- What do I do if the script doesn't seem to be getting better?
- What if the writer won't take my notes?
- What if I/my financier want to replace the writer?

Genesis of Ideas:

We will look at the genesis of some popular films, discuss how and where great ideas come from, how you know it's a good idea, and how to find and decide the right medium for an idea. **Everyone should be prepared to discuss one of their favorite movies and its provenance – where the idea came from.*

Assignment: Coverage & pitching on a TV pilot. There are two parts to the assignment for next week: Please write a (2) page coverage summary about your assigned pilot that. *Everyone should prepare coverage.* Additionally, prepare a 3-minute pitch of the pilot story and *choose one person* in your group to present next week. *WORK AS A GROUP.*

Handouts, in-class discussion: Coverage guidelines. Sample development notes. TV pitch guidelines.

WEEK 5, September 19, 2023, Legal Review

Guest speaker: *Helen Estabrook, Producer/Executive*

In-class – TV Pilot pitches

Development and Story Notes:

- Written vs. verbal “notes”, which are better?
- What is a “beat sheet” and how do you get the writer to do one?
- What is “development hell” and how do I get out of it?
- What do I do when I disagree with financier's/studio's notes?

Review of the notes process. Writing notes.

- Intro, compliment, as part of email or in intro – suggestions, food for thought, etc.
- Headline – story, them.
- Headlines – characters.
- Page notes. Specific examples.

An overview of the types of contracts and agreements producers should have with writers, studios, other producers, etc. Options, shopping agreements, attachment letters, writer deal guidelines, etc.

The Idea/ Source Material/ Treatments:

- Rights: Getting rights to articles, books, people.

- Should I contact an author directly?
- Protecting your ideas.
- Fleshing out your ideas by finding collaborators.
- How to make a deal with a writer

Handouts: Option and agreement samples, writer deal examples. Excerpts from clearance and copyright. Read: Clearance and Copyright Chapters 1, 2, & 4: Copyright and Ideas; Public Domain; Fair Use.

Assignment: Prepare a two-three page synopsis of your final project idea. Turn in next week.

WEEK 6, September 26, 2023, Packaging your project

Guest speaker: *David Kantor, Manager/Producer Anonymous Content*

In-class: Finish (if not done) group *TV pilot pitches: 3-5 minutes.*

Coverage review

- Don't use character name in logline.
- Character summaries are not comments. Describe, don't analyze.
- If use comment summary up front, it is short. Save more detail for longer comment.
- Use a format. Put your name on the work.
- Be clear in the comment re recommendation, guidance.

Packaging

Attaching High Profile Directors, Writers and Actors:

- Who should I call: agents and managers, what's the difference?
- How do I get my script to a big "name" actor or director?
- How do I get a director or talent attached without financing?
- Improving your ideas with visual development and reference material.
- Packaging – which elements are necessary, most important?

Handouts: Sample Casting, director and writer lists, mood boards.

Assignment: Create casting, director and writers lists for your final project. Due next week.

WEEK 7, October 3, 2023, Indie Filmmaking, Financing

Guest Speaker: *Independent Financing Executive/Agent*

Putting your project together and finding financing.

- What are your tools to attach talent to your project?
- Finding finance for mainstream filmed content development & production.

- Self-financing and crowdsourcing.
- The reality of NO's and how to get a YES's.

Independent Financing:

The importance of independent & self-finance for producers – How to cultivate it, how to make it work for you in deal making, on set, in post-production, and in distribution. Crowd sourcing and other web-based means of raising money.

- *The Changing Landscape*. Pre-sales vs equity vs streamers.

Structure of foreign sales, estimates, equity, bridge loan, structure to pay SAG, DGA, WGA – bond.

Synopsis Writing & Storytelling - Review

Assignment: For the pilot groups: Create a packaging list. Who would star and why? Create a mood board and a casting visual presentation for your pilot. Due week 9.

WEEK 8, October 10, 2023, Individual Meetings re Final Project

Assignment: Revised synopsis due.

WEEK 9, October 17, 2023, Television

Guest Speaker: *Erik Olesen – TV showrunner / writer / producer*

The process of mounting a TV/Digital Production:

- Pitching a TV show.
- Developing a TV show.
- Casting a TV show.
- Dealing with network executives and studio executives.
- Choosing a show runner.
- Staffing a show.
- The process on a pilot - choosing the director.
- The writer's room – what is it and how does it work?
- What are the jobs on a TV show and what is the job path for newcomers?

In-class: Discussion of favorite TV shows – setup, season arcs.

Handouts: exec summary examples.

Assignment: Executive summary, first draft. Revised mood boards, if needed.

WEEK 10, October 24, 2023, Collaboration, building a team

Guest speaker: *Andy Bourne, TV Executive, Amazon*

How to Hire a Director

Working with the Director:

- How to support their creative process.
- Working with a writer-director.
- How to serve the needs of the financier/distributor together.
- The process on key hires.
- Working together in preproduction on securing cast and financing.
- Final work on script—adjustments for budget, location, cast, and acts of God.

Continue TV discussion

- Writer room dynamics
- Director role
- Non-writing EP
- Storytelling

Assignment: Gather visual materials on final project, polish visual presentation of final project packaging lists

WEEK 11, October 31, 2023, Publicity and Marketing, Market research

Guest speaker: *Val Van Gelder, Marketing Executive*

Different types of publicity and marketing, aspects to explore

- Align everyone - the message, define your audience
- Creative advertising
- Publicity
- Digital
- Media
- Content
- Research
- Brand Partnerships

The producer's role. Start early.

Understanding your audience:

- Target an audience - demographic, psychographic.
- Genre.
- Marketing opportunities: brand, star, story, etc.

Assignment: Prepare 1st pass of Marketing, distribution plans for final project. Who is your target audience, how will you reach them? Financing/Budget plan.

Prepare TV analysis: pilot comps, network targets

WEEK 12, November 7, 2023, Building a Presentation

Guest Speaker: *Cassidy Lange, Film Exec, Netflix*

Each project varies – Make yours personal!

- This is a Sales tool. Make it sizzle!
- Write as if you're talking not writing!
- Elements of a strong presentation.
 - Cover Page with a strong image—Think movie poster!
 - Overview (preferably one page)—What is the proposition/ask? What the story concept? What is the marketing hook and the target audience?
 - Story Elements (2-3 pages)—Concise version of the full story, key characters and storyworld.
 - Creative Team—Only the elements that are actually attached.
 - Visual Elements (1-2 pages)—Provide the “look & feel” for your project that is clear and references your comps, powerful zeitgeist trends and/or classic images.
 - Appendix (Backup information like packaging lists, research information, etc.)
- Choice of format—Text Document, PowerPoint/Keynote, Pitch Book.
- Write out a text only version that is 3-5 pages.
- Edit down your Pitch Narrative to a concise PowerPoint/Keynote that is 7-15 slides.
- Create your appendix so you are ready to provide supporting material upon request.
- Consider the setting for your presentation.
 - What kind of buyer is it?
 - Will you be using the deck as support for a verbal pitch? If so, make it visual and avoid too much text.
 - Is the presentation something that you leave behind? If so, make sure it is tight and not burdened with too much detail.

In-class workshop discussion: How to advocate for or against buying a project, using your TV pilot examples. *Find relevant comps of TV shows. How will this show stand out, separate itself? If it won't (from the network's point of view), why not?*

Handouts: project presentations

Assignment: TV Groups: *Network/Studio reports*

WEEK 13, November 14, 2023, PRODUCTION—PROBLEM-SOLVING, ACCOUNTABILITY & QUALITY

Guest Speaker: *Producer / Independent Studio Executive*

The Calm Center of the Storm.

- Building creative partnerships.
- Maintaining creative integrity and business concerns.
- Managing on-set problems and egos.

In class: *TV group presentations of studios/networks/platforms.*

Budget, Financing, Critical Assumptions

- **Critical assumptions**
- **Producer's prep & production responsibilities**

Assignment: Prepare financing, buyer plan for final project. Include critical assumptions for budget target. Create a visual marketing tool to help sell your final project/assignment (prop, giveaway, sizzle reel, web page, one-sheet, etc.). *First Pass at final project.*

Handouts: Critical assumptions

WEEK 14, November 21, 2023, Analysis of Material, Storytelling

Studio/network analysis of material

- How do they choose to buy?
- Target audience.
- Viability.
- Competitive landscape – internal and external.

Week 15, November 28, 2023, FINAL INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS

Instructor will hold individual meetings to follow up with each student on their final project and discuss the final assignment.

STUDY DAYS: December 2 - 5

December 10, 2022: FINAL PROJECT DUE, INCLUDING REVISIONS

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.

Safety:

All students are expected to abide by USC School of Cinematic Arts Safety Guidelines. Violations of any of the safety guidelines may result in disciplinary action ranging from confiscation of footage to expulsion from the University.

Stressful Times:

These are stressful times in our country, and Graduate School in and of itself is stressful. We encourage you to take care of yourself and your fellow students. USC provides opportunities for Mindful Meditation <http://mindful.usc.edu> and Mental health counseling is available at the Engemann Student Health Center, 1031 W. 34th Street, 213-740-9355.

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) 740-2421studentaffairs.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) 740-0776dsp.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) 821-4710studentaffairs.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) 740-2101diversity.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 calldps.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 calldps.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.