<u>SYLLABUS</u>

Writing The Hour-Long Dramatic Series
CTWR 421, Section 19203D
Fall 2023

INSTRUCTOR: KATIE WECH
kwech@usc.edu
Office Hours: By Appointment

CLASS SESSIONS: Wednesdays, 1:00 PM – 3:50 PM

LOCATION: SCA 362
CREDIT HOURS: 2 units
COURSE LINK: blackboard.usc.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION

During this semester, you will study a one-hour drama currently airing on broadcast, cable or streaming. You'll examine your chosen show's style, structure, and storytelling until you are ready to write your own original "spec" episode. You will pitch the idea, break the story, write the beat sheet, outline, and the script. You will learn how to develop a series "bible," compare premise and non-premise pilots, and study both procedural story engines and character-driven/relationship stories (aka "soaps.") Through participation in a workshop environment that mimics a real-world writers' room, you will complete an hour-long teleplay, gain insight into the business of entertainment, and experience the process of writing professionally for television.

COURSE GOALS

Upon successfully completing this course, students will be able to:

- Understand the process of writing episodic drama
- Give and receive constructive criticism on story and scene work
- Approximate the voice, style, and structure of an existing series
- Pitch and develop a spec story idea from beat sheet to outline
- Write a one-hour television drama script

COURSE OBJECTIVE

Write a spec script for an existing TV drama series. The completed script will count as the final for this course.

GRADES

Attendance is mandatory. Unexcused absences will affect your grade (see Writing Division policy included in this syllabus).

GRADE BREAKDOWN

10% Participation/discussion of other students' work.
20% Beat Sheet/skinny beats
20% Outline
25% First Draft of Completed Script
25% Final Draft

Breakdown of numeric to letter grade, per Writing Division policy:
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%

A.I. POLICY

The uses of generative Artificial Intelligence to create narrative continue to evolve throughout the media workplace. However, it is vital that before relying on AI to assist in aspects of storytelling that we learn to source and execute our work via our own unique imagination.

Creative, analytical, and critical thinking skills are part of the learning outcomes of this course. All assignments should be prepared by the student working individually or in groups. Students may not have another person or entity complete any substantive portion of the assignment. Developing strong competencies in these areas will prepare you for a competitive workplace. Therefore, using AI-generated tools is prohibited in this course, will be identified as plagiarism, and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

CLASS SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNMENTS

Scenes must be written in a scriptwriting format and posted to Blackboard in PDF form.

Unless otherwise stated, *assignments must be posted by noon on the Sunday before class*.

*A word on **DEADLINES**: Meeting deadlines is of utmost importance in television. A late script can have catastrophic consequences for a show's production, and for the individual writer. I urge you to take deadlines seriously – for the sake of your grade, and your career. It's due when it's due. Period.

COURSE CALENDAR
Subject to change with notification

Week One (8/23/23)

General introductions, course overview and objectives. How episodic series writing differs from screenwriting. Discuss Act Structure and A, B & C stories, procedural vs. soap story engines, and different approaches to pilot stories. Class will discuss and debate potential series for spec episodes, narrowing down contenders. Final 3 shows will be decided next week. Prospective shows must meet the definition of a standard one-hour drama. While we aim for a variety of tones, styles, and story arenas, potential shows should possess some foundational conventions of the one-hour form. The professor maintains the authority to overrule the popular vote and choose another series.

Assignment: Over the next week, study 2-3 shows from the list of contenders chosen by the class. Watch episodes and read episodic teleplays for each show, then decide which one you'd like to write.

Send your *first and second show choices* to me via Blackboard by Sunday (8/27) at noon.

Week Two (8/30/23)

Discuss the episodes you watched and teleplays you read. Discuss the art and business of television. Understand the structure of a broadcast network season vs. streaming models. Continued discussion on series arcs, series format, series bible. What is a story area? How to pitch it? *Final 3 shows will be announced by the end of class today.*

Assignment: Watch chosen series. **Choose which show you will write** if you haven't done so yet. Begin drafting ideas for your spec story area and preparing to pitch it to the class.

Week Three (9/6/23)

THE BREAK: The process and procedure for breaking story – By Character vs. by Act Out – What does the story demand? Examining typical episodic structure: Teaser, Act Breaks, character arcs and storylines. How many acts, how many storylines/runners? What does your *show* demand?

Intro to the beat sheet and outline. What are "skinny beats?"

Begin oral presentations of story area (aka pitching) for anyone ready.

Assignment: Prepare your story pitch. For those who presented today, refine your pitch, start thinking about the break and beat sheet.

Week Four (9/13/23)

Pitch Fest. Presentation and workshopping of all remaining story areas. Story areas to be refined outside of class, feedback incorporated into your beat sheets for next week.

More structure study, story breaking and re-breaking. Intro to capturing the "voice" of the show.

Assignment: Rough beat sheets due by <u>noon on Sunday</u>. Only the "skinny beats!"

Week Five (9/20/23)

Have read and be prepared to discuss all beat sheets. Going from beat sheet to outline. How best to break your story – what does *your* specific show demand? The "mushy middle" – when in doubt, turn back to character/conflict

Assignment: First draft of outline. Flesh out skinny beats, Act Outs, A, B, C storylines and runners. 5-8 pages. <u>Due by noon on Sunday</u>.

Week Six (9/27/23)

Workshop outlines. Come prepared with thoughtful feedback and solution-oriented pitches for your classmates, they will do the same for you.

Week Six Assignment: For those going to script: incorporate outline notes into your script pages this week. For those needing to re-break parts of their story, re-work outline per class notes and re-submit outline to me via Blackboard.

If you're on script: <u>Act One due at noon on Sunday</u>.

If you're rebreaking: <u>Revised Outline due at noon Sunday</u>, with revisions marked in blue.

Week Seven (10/4/23)

Workshop select Act One scenes and give feedback on revised outlines.

- Writers will form into a **A** and **B** groups to present work. Starting in week 8 (next week,) class feedback will focus on one group per class.

Assignments: Finish Act One, begin writing Act Two, or Begin Act One after outline approval. Incorporate any notes on outline directly into script pages. *<u>All Acts due by noon on Sunday.</u>

Week Eight (10/11/23)

Workshop **GROUP A** (Scenes from Acts One & Two.)

Assignment: Finish writing Act One - i**f ready, move on to Act Two!**
Finish writing Act Two. <u>Pages due by noon on Sunday</u>.
Please read all material in advance and prepare thorough notes for your classmates.

Week Nine (10/18/23)

Workshop **GROUP B** Scenes from Acts One and Two. Character and narrative voice check-in. Do your characters sound like the show? Is your spec episode's Style/Tone/Mood aligned with the actual episodes you studied for reference?

Assignment: Begin writing Act Three or Act Two, respectively. Go back to the teleplays you read for your show, compare and contrast one character for voice. What about the action lines?

Pages for respective acts due at noon on Sunday.

Week Ten (10/25/23)

Workshop **GROUP A:** Acts Two and Three.

Assignment: Start and/or finish writing Act Three. Pages due by noon on Sunday.

Week Eleven (11/1/23)

Workshop **GROUP B**: Scenes from Acts Two and Three and any revisions on earlier acts.

Week Eleven Assignment: Finish Act Three, or begin Act Four. Pages due by noon on Sunday.

Week Twelve (11/8/23)

Workshop **GROUP A**: End of Act Three scenes, and Beginning of Act Four scenes.

For those who finish Act Four this week: Type "The End," take a deep breath, then return to earlier acts to rewrite and refine per class notes, and your own analysis of your pages as compared to the teleplays from your chosen show.

Next week we will workshop *all remaining Act Fours*, finished and unfinished, then we'll pivot to workshopping as many completed scripts as time allows.

Assignment: Begin Act Four or Finish Act Four. Pages due by noon on Sunday. **For those turning in completed Scripts – see below.**

** SATURDAY, 11/11/23 -- **Suggested EARLIER DUE DATE for folks wanting notes on their completed scripts next week**. Scripts are technically due at noon on Sunday per usual, but *an earlier delivery would give your fellow students more time for a thorough and thoughtful read*, should it be possible. Food for thought!

Week Thirteen (11/15/23)

Workshop **all remaining Act Fours** (Groups **A** and **B**) and congratulate each other on how far you've come! Those who just finished their drafts have until after Thanksgiving to incorporate feedback. Time to burnish, refine, circle back to your chosen show's teleplays for a voice/style pass. Does it read like an episode of the show? Does it SOUND like one?

For those with complete drafts who want notes today: If you would like class notes *before* Thanksgiving, please tell me in advance so I can allocate time accordingly. If we do workshop your complete script in class today, we will likely *not* have time to do so again, though we can read scenes/pages you may have revised as long as they don't exceed 10-12 pages.

For those with complete drafts who are willing to wait until after Thanksgiving for notes: If there's anything you'd like to discuss prior to the break, please reach out to me to schedule office hours. I am available until EOD on Tuesday, 11/21/23.

Assignments: **Finish your script before we resume on 11/29/23**. First drafts and revised drafts are due Sunday, November 26th at noon.

But again… when the reading load is on the heavier side, earlier is better. So I'll gently reiterate a SUGGESTED EARLIER DEADLINE of Saturday, 11/25/23, if possible.

Week Fourteen (11/22/23)

NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY

Week Fifteen (11/29/23)

Workshop remaining finished scripts, paying special attention to story structure and progression, character arc, drive, conflict and "voice" both of characters and of action/narration. Summary of the course and Q & A about the world of television.

Assignment: Address all remaining notes, polish and finalize script to turn in.

Deadline: Final draft of teleplays are due by midnight on Friday, 12/8/23.

RECOMMENDED (NOT REQUIRED) READING:
The Creative Act: A Way of Being
By Rick Rubin

Expectation of Professionalism

All material is 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. During this course you will be required to submit work that will be critiqued by the class. Please come to class having read your fellow students' work and prepared with constructive comments, and let's aim to always be mindful of the effort every writer puts into their work. There's enough room at the top for all of you, and you'll get there faster if you lift each other up.

Writing Division Attendance Policy

This class is a workshop and your participation in the discussion is important. Participation includes full involvement in, and contribution to, class discussion, as well as reading the assignments of your colleagues and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.

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-). Further unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered another two thirds of a point (ex: B to a C+) for each unexcused absence.

If you find you must miss a class, letting me know in advance will allow me to reallocate class time accordingly and would be greatly appreciated. If it is not possible due to an emergency or personal difficulty, contact me as soon as possible so I can assist you in finding the appropriate University care and guidance, if needed. Your health and well-being are of utmost importance to the Wells Writing Division and to your Faculty.

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.

Internet Policy: Material discussed in class is considered private and should not be posted or shared anywhere outside of class.

Recording Devices: You may not record lectures or workshops without instructor consent.

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." Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct at 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 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 micro aggressions 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,* Non-emergency assistance or information: dps.usc.edu.

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 Liason: http://cinema.usc.edu/about/diversity.cfm; email 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.