

**USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS**  
**The John Wells Division of Writing for Screen & Television**

**CTWR 421: Writing the Hour-Long Dramatic Series**  
**Section 19205**  
**(2 Units)**  
**Fall 2023**

Instructor: Jeremy Novick  
Class Schedule: Tuesdays, 7-10 pm  
Class Location: SCA 362  
Office Hours: By Appointment  
Contact Information: [jnovick@usc.edu](mailto:jnovick@usc.edu)

**Course Objective:**

Our goal is to write a polished hour-long episode of an existing television series with a complete understanding of the process: How to mimic the world of the series, how to choose and pitch a spec story for that series, how to outline an hour-long episode, and finally, how to write the script.

**Course Description:**

This course is conducted as a writers' room, with the operating principle that we are interdependent and that twelve brains are better than one. Everyone will be involved in the conception and realization of everyone else's script. This is how it works in a real, professional TV writers' room, and it's how it will work in this class.

**Course Reading:**

***Writing the TV Drama Series*** by Pamela Douglas, 3rd edition - required for anyone who has not read this book in a previous class.

**Script Format:**

All scenes will be written in standard script format using professional screenwriting software such as "Final Draft." **If you don't have access to screenwriting software, please see me immediately, and we will work on an alternative solution together.**

**Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:**

Laptops are to be used solely for scene work being discussed in class, and only with the permission of the instructor. Cell phones will be turned off.

**Please note: You should always have a notebook/pen available.**

**Grading Criteria:**

Students will turn in their work by 1pm on the Sunday before class, by a method to be determined by the instructor. All work will be sent to the instructor, as well as all classmates, so that feedback can be given. This deadline is extremely important. As a workshop-style course, it is vital that we read each other's material and come prepared for class, and we must be respectful of each other's time in doing that work. If you repeatedly fail to meet weekly deadlines without communication, it will affect grading.

### **Grading Breakdown**

- 10% = Participation
- 20% = Episode Breakdowns & Grids
- 20% = Outline
- 5% = Teaser & Act One
- 5% = Act Two
- 5% = Act Three
- 5% = Act Four
- 10% = Completed First Draft
- 20% = Final Rewritten Script

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%

### **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. Spellcheck and proofread your assignment prior to submission. We are all taking the time to read your work; you should, too.

### **Internet Policy:**

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere 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 purpose of taking notes during workshop. Cell phones should be turned off. Students using phones will be asked to leave class.

**Please note: You should always have a notebook/pen available.**

### **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 (in advance at times; see schedule) 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-). 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, etc.

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 the utmost importance to the Wells Writing Division and to your Faculty.

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.

### **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.

Creating, 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:**

**All dates, assignments, and subjects are subject to change at the discretion of the professor.**

**Reminder: All homework is due the Sunday before class, by 1pm.**

#### **Week 1: Introductions**

- Introductions, syllabus, and the principles of writing episodic TV drama.
- Screening: Mad Men – “Pilot” and “Shut the Door. Have a Seat.”
- **Assignment #1:** Write four (4) paragraphs describing the structure of the Mad Men episode, “Shut the Door. Have a Seat.”
  - Paragraph One: What is the problem?
  - Paragraph Two: How and when does the problem escalate?
  - Paragraph Three: When does the story reach a crisis and what is it?
  - Page Four: When do we start the resolution and what is it?

**Week 2: Being a Chameleon**

- Review structure assignments of Mad Men episode.
- Discuss grids and the basic 4-Act episodic structure, and how it can be applied to 5-Act, 6-Act, and No-Act series.
- Screening: This Is Us, “Pilot”
- **Assignment #2:** Prepare a grid for the This Is Us pilot (available for re-watch free on NBC.com). Each scene in the beat sheet should have:
  - Slugline
  - Major characters present
  - Conflict of the scene – What is the want, and what is the problem?
  - See below for an example to get started with:

Teaser	Act One	Act Two	Act Three	Act Four	Act Five
<b>INT. PEARSON HOME – BEDROOM – DAY</b> Jack wants his traditional birthday “sexy dance”, but Rebecca feels unsexy in her body.					
<b>INT. KATE’S HOME – KITCHEN – DAY</b> Kate struggles to stay on her strict diet.					

- At home, respond to Google Poll to help us decide on 3 series that you can choose from to write.

**Week 3: Executing Your Showrunner’s Vision**

- Review grids for This Is Us pilot.
- Discuss our Google Poll of series and choose your show.
- **Assignment #3:** Choose a show to write. Watch the pilot, most recent episode, and one other episode of your choice. Write one (1) page for each episode answering our 4 major story questions (5%).
  - Paragraph One: What is the problem?
  - Paragraph Two: How and when does the problem escalate?
  - Paragraph Three: When does the story reach a crisis and what is it?
  - Page Four: When do we start the resolution and what is it?
- **Assignment #4:** Create a grid for the most recent episode. Be prepared for next class to talk about your show’s theme, tone, characters, and structure. What questions must be answered in the next episode (5%)?
  - NOTE: The more familiar you are with your show, the better off you will be, so while the assignment here is to just watch the pilot and most recent episodes, you are encouraged to watch and read as much of the show as possible. If you need help finding scripts, please let me know.

**Week 4: Finding the North Star**

- Discuss episode breakdowns/grids and discuss how to find an episode’s theme. What is the “North Star” that you will follow throughout this process?

- **Assignment #5:** Prepare three (3) paragraph-long pitches for possible A-Stories for your spec episode and be prepared to pitch them verbally in class. What is the main problem of your episode? How does it escalate? When and how does it reach a crisis? How, if at all, is it resolved?

#### **Week 5: Your Voice Vs. The Show's Voice**

- Pitch and discuss A-Stories and choose one to use for your episode. How do we find a story that feels like something the show would do, but still highlights your own personal experience and voice?
- **Assignment #6:** Prepare paragraph-long B and C stories for your episode.

#### **Week 6: Stories That Complement Each Other**

- Pitch B/C/D stories and discuss how they can possibly complement and interact with our A-Stories. How do we create an episode with stories that feel unique and different but still serve the same holistic purpose?
- **Assignment #7:** Create a grid for your own spec episode, laying out all the beats for you're A, B, and C Stories. Compare to the grid you made for the most recent episode of your show. Does it feel similar in structure, length, shape? Are you including all the characters the show normally includes? (10%).

*(Note: At this point, in-class workshoping will be divided into A & B groups. Each week, we will discuss one group's work in class, and send notes via email to the other group. Please continue to turn in your assigned pages by the deadline, regardless of group.)*

#### **Week 7: Complication**

- Group A will pitch their episodes with their grids. We will send notes to Group B on their grids via email.

#### **Week 8: Escalation**

- Group B will pitch their episodes with their grids (which should include some changes based on the notes you received via email). We will send notes to Group A on their revised grids.
- **Assignment #8:** Using the notes you received from myself and the class, convert your grids into full written outlines (20%).

#### **Week 9: Crisis**

- Workshop outlines (Group A in class / Group B via email).

#### **Week 10: Resolution**

- Workshop outlines (Group B in class / Group A via email).
- **Assignment #9:** Start writing! Just the Teaser & Act One for now (5%).

#### **Week 11: Too Good Not to Watch**

- Workshop Teaser and Act One (Group A in class / Group B via email).
- **Assignment #10:** Write Act Two (5%).

#### **Week 12: Momentum**

- Workshop Act Two (Group B in class / Group A via email).

- **Assignment #11:** Write Act Three (5%).

**Week 13: Give Them What They Want**

Workshop Act Three (Group A in class / Group B via email).

**Assignment #12:** Write Act Four (5%).

**Week 14: The Familiar Made Unique**

- Workshop Act Four (Group B in class / Group A via email).
- **Assignment #13:** Finish your script (10%).

**Week 15: Season Finale**

- Discuss rewriting, final thoughts and questions.
- TBD Surprise Special Guest(s)

**Finals Week: Final drafts of scripts are due (20%)**

## **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>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>PLEASE NOTE:</b> <b>FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX</b></p>
--