

Special Topics: PITCHING 101
**PITCHING THE FILM AND TELEVISION SERIES:
HOW TO SELL YOURSELF AND YOUR STORY**

CTWR 555 – Section #19273D
Wednesdays – 10AM -1:00 PM– SCA 216
Fall 2023 Semester

Professor: Rick Parks
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Office Hours by appointment – usually before class.

Course Description:

Any working Hollywood writer will tell you that they often have to spend as much time *talking* about what they're writing as they do actually writing it. And that's because a critical tool in any successful TV or screenwriter's belt is the ability to creatively and succinctly sell their stories *and themselves* to those in a position to pay for both.

This introductory class is designed to educate students on the basic *why's* and *how's* of pitching for features and television. Through analysis and application of basic verbal storytelling skills, subtle techniques of directed conversation and self-marketing, as well as carefully identifying what makes each student unique as a commodity in a talent-driven town—participants will acquire a new and crucial level of confidence in the pitching process—ultimately helping them become as proficient on the “stage” as they are on the page.

Drawing on the instructor's personal and professional experiences in writing for the large and small screen, as well as that of other accomplished guests working in both mediums, this course will work toward three structured goals:

1. How to pitch a dramatic or comedic feature in twenty minutes or less; including major protagonists, antagonists, basic plot-line, character arcs, and compelling set-pieces—then anticipate and answer detailed questions from the class about their film.
2. How to pitch a dramatic or comedic television series in twenty minutes or less; including premise, characters, pilot story overview, series arc, and episodic ideas—then anticipate and answer detailed questions from the class about their series.
3. Repeating their choice of the above before a panel of experienced writers, directors, producers, and executives, with questions and commentary—as a final project.

NOTE for the squeamish:

The goal of this series of encounters is to get past any fear of being and selling yourself and your work. The professor demands that this gathering be a safe space in which to fail hard and be supported by cohort empathy before slamming to the deck. If you feel that you cannot support your peers in this

exploration, please consider withdrawing from the class. We are here for the most fragile amongst us and endeavor to remove all egos from the process of learning to get a job.

Meeting Information:

The course will be held for three hours, once a week. The first half will be devoted to a discussion of topics and techniques further detailed in the course content section of this syllabus. The second half will focus on student *application* and demonstration of those skills discussed; with analysis and critique from the instructor *and class* as a whole.

Suggested Texts:

“Film School: The True Story of a Midwestern Family Man Who Went to the World’s Most Famous Film School, Fell Flat on His Face, Had a Stroke, and Sold a Television Series to CBS” by Steve Boman.

"Pitching Hollywood: How to Sell Your TV and Movie Ideas" by Jonathan Koch, Robert Kosberg, and Tanya Meurur Norman.

Several considerate ESSAYS on pitching will be shared as well.

Students will, as an exercise, be asked to review recognizably produced films and/or series in order to summarize and pitch them to the class.

Evaluation of Student Performance:

Class Participation: 10%

Class Pitching Experience: 60%

Final Pitching Project: 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%

MORE RULES:

Expectation of Professionalism:

All material is expected to be submitted/performed on time and in the proper format. Any written assignments will be penalized for grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, format mistakes, and typos. Please proof your assignment prior to submission.

Internet Policy:

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the internet.

Recording Devices:

You may not record lectures or workshops without the consent of the instructor.

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:

LAPTOPS are not to be opened unless you are on a break or you are using it for an assignment or a Zoom pitch. CELL PHONES are for breaks only.

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 will hold up the business of the class. Please make your best effort to be on time. If you have a conflict that will cause you to miss class, you need to secure the instructor's approval of that absence in advance of the class.

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.

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. If you miss class without informing your instructor, it will be considered an unexcused absence.

Unexcused absences can lower your final grade for the course. 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 professor.

FINALLY...

Course Content (summarized by class meeting)

Week 1 (class 1) • Introduction

Introductions: Who we are and why we are here – with a beginning eye toward how to quickly pitch ourselves from the moment we walk in the room, (i.e., the instructor “pitches” himself).

Course overview – objectives, assignments, grading, etc.

In-class Team Exercise: Break room into pairs for ten minutes of personal background conversation, then have them *pitch each other* as the perfect writer for one of several fictional projects created by the instructor. Discuss with each 'pitcher' how they might have sold themselves differently for the job.

“The Five C’s:” *Courage, Clarity, Commitment, Creativity, Conversation.*

Do writers have to pitch? Do writers have to eat? Are all pitches the same? Are all stories or writers the same? Whether pitching for features or TV (in this class, both)

practice almost always makes perfect. Are there tricks or formulas that can be applied to pitching? What's a Cereal Box pitch? A short pitch? A full-length pitch?

Discussion of Final Project: Pitching a series or film to the class and professional guests

HW: Think about how you would pitch your favorite film

Week 2 (class 2) • Owning the Room

Discussion: Doing your homework. Knowing in advance who your audience is and how to put that knowledge to work. How to make a personal connection/impression, segue into a pitch, and rise above the din. How can a writer walk in and own the room? Fear vs. excitement. Power Posturing.

Students present their Favorite Film summaries.

In class: Tell me a story-

HW: Extend your favorite film summary in writing into a compelling conversational short pitch (3-5 minutes min/max). Be prepared to discuss the genre, premise, tone, theme, and basic plot in three act structures. Identify *primary* characters, their arcs, and *at least two* compelling set pieces or "trailer moments".

Week 3 (class 3) • Less is More

Discussion: The biggest difference between a script and a pitch? *Two hours*. How to identify the key elements of a film, its plot, and characters and distill them into a compelling conversational pitch. Is pacing important? How much is too much?

Students present their Favorite Film in 3-5 minute, short pitches.

Assignment: Select an original feature idea you have either already written or would like to write. Prepare a paragraph summary (*cereal box pitch*) you can verbalize for the next class.

(possible) Second Assignment: Prepare for next week's guest speaker introduction.

Week 4 (class 4) • The Boy Scout Motto

Discussion: How to prepare for a pitch. Why it's important to be "off-book." How to anticipate and answer questions about the project. What happens when a good pitch goes bad? Is there such a thing as Plan B?

Students present their Original Film as a cereal box pitch.

Assignment: Extend your original film summary in writing into a compelling conversational short pitch (3-5 minutes min/max). Be prepared to discuss the genre, premise, tone, theme, and basic plot in three act structure. Identify primary characters, their arcs, and at least two compelling set pieces.

Week 5 (class 5) • Show and Tell

Discussion: Are props or visual aids necessary in a pitch? Why or why not? Should leave-behinds be left behind? If not, then what are they there for? What is *new* in this industry and how can you stay on top of that?

Students present their 3-5 minute Original Film short pitches. Questions from the class are *highly encouraged*.

Assignment: Using those questions, adjust and amend your brief original film pitch into a compelling and conversational *full-length pitch* (10 minutes min/max). Be prepared to discuss the genre, premise, tone, theme, and basic plot in three act structure. Identify primary characters, their arcs, and at least two compelling set pieces.

Class will be split in half and a coin tossed to determine which half presents the following week. (*be prepared for the professor to swap groups at the last minute!*)

Week 6 (class 6) • The Feature Pitch: Part One

First half of the students present their 10 minute, full-length Original Film pitches. Pitches are analyzed and discussed by the class and instructor.

Week 7 (class 7) • The Feature Pitch: Part Two

Second half of the students present their full-length 10 minute, Original Film pitches. Pitches are analyzed and discussed by the class and instructor.

Discussion: How could you expand that 10 minute novella to a 20 minute beast?

Discussion: How to identify the key elements of a **series** that will help it be sold. Multiple pitches and the pilot pitching season. How are studio and/or producer pitches different from network pitches?

First Assignment: Select a favorite series idea you have enjoyed over the years. Prepare a *written* cereal box pitch, as if it's your own, which you can then verbalize.

Week 8 (class 8) • Small Screen vs. Big Screen

Discussion: What makes a series pitch different from a feature pitch?

Students present their Favorite Series cereal box pitches. Questions from the class are *strongly* encouraged.

Assignment: Select an original series idea you have either *already written* or would *like* to write. Prepare a written, cereal box pitch you can verbalize for the next class.

Week 9 (class 9) • More is More

Discussion: How do you *demonstrate* that a series concept is capable of supporting more than one season's worth of episodes?

Students present their Original Series cereal box pitches. Questions by the class are encouraged.

Assignment: Extend your original series summary into a 3-5 minute, original series short pitch; including premise and tone, *major* characters, and basic *pilot* story.

Week 10 (class 10) • Answering Questions Before They're Asked

Discussion: How do you anticipate the kinds of questions which might be asked by the producers and/or executives you're pitching to?

Students present their Original Series 3-5 minute short pitches. Questions by the class are encouraged.

Assignment: Using those questions, amend and extend your original series overview into a full-length pitch (10 minutes min/max), which also includes a *minimum* of three episodic ideas.

Class will be split in half and a coin tossed to determine which half presents the following week. (*as before, prepare for a last-minute swap!*)

Week 11 (class 11) • The Series Pitch: Part One

First half of the students present their 10 minute, Original Series, full-length pitches. Pitches are analyzed and discussed by both the class and instructor.

Week 12 (class 12) • The Series Pitch: Part Two

Second half of the students present their 10 minute, Original Series, full-length pitches. Pitches are analyzed and discussed by the class and instructor.

Week 13 (class 13) • Choices, Choices

Students will make a “pitch” to the class and instructor about which project they’ve chosen to present as their final project before a panel of Hollywood professionals—their full-length original feature or original series concept.

Until that time, individual student pitches will be “fine-tuned” for final delivery.

Week 14 (class 14) • TBA

Week 15 (class 15) • TBA

Course Final: Part One (NIGHT FINAL)

First half of the students present their 10 minute Original Feature or Series pitches. Pitches are analyzed and discussed by the Guest Panel and instructor.

GUEST PANEL To Be Announced :

Course Final: Part Two (NIGHT FINAL)

Second half of the students present their 10 minute Original Feature or Series pitches. Pitches are analyzed and discussed by the Guest Panel and instructor.

GUEST PANEL To Be Announced:

IN ORDER TO ENSURE THE MOST QUALITATIVE FEEDBACK FROM OUR ESTEEMED INDUSTRY GUEST PANELS, THE COURSE FINAL FOR PITCHING 101 MAY TAKE PLACE OVER TWO NIGHTS.

PLEASE NOTE: IF THIS IS THE CASE, ALL STUDENTS ARE REQUIRED TO ATTEND BOTH DAYS IN ORDER TO NOT ONLY DELIVER THEIR OWN PITCHES, BUT ALSO TO LEARN FROM THEIR CLASSMATES. FAILURE TO ATTEND BOTH NIGHTS WILL SIGNIFICANTLY IMPACT YOUR GRADE AND ANY OR ALL SCHEDULING CONFLICTS MUST BE RESOLVED DIRECTLY WITH PROFESSOR PRIOR TO FINALS.

but wait...

...THERE'S MORE FINE PRINT:

*Note: 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 this letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.- 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The telephone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

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.

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) 740-2421
studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions for appropriate investigation and response.

The Office of Student Accessibility Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776

osas.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/ssg

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

dps.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.

PLEASE NOTE:

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