

**School of Cinematic Arts  
The John Wells Division of  
Writing for Screen and Television**

**CTWR 585 Special Topics (2 units)  
Section Title: Staff Writer to Showrunner  
Fall 2023**

Instructor: Brian Peterson  
Class Schedule: Monday 7pm-10pm  
Class Location: SCA 255  
Office Hours: Upon request  
**Contact Information:** brianwap@usc.edu

**Course Objective:**

This course is tailored to students who wish to create and run their own TV show, but who will likely work their way up from the entry level position as a staff writer. The classes provide a roadmap for that trajectory and the multitude of tools needed to ascend. It will be a highly interactive class, geared primarily toward dramatic writing, yet with many concepts discussed applicable to comedy as well.

**Course Description:**

Each weekly 3-hour seminar will consist of a lecture and in-depth Q&A discussion about an aspect of either the creative or business side of the industry. Assignments will be primarily scripts to read from both past and present eras as well as episodic viewing.

There will be a small writing component, focused on arcing stories over a season, world building, establishing a story engine, twisting ongoing serialized relationships, and constructing professional pitches and outlines. As with most television writing, the class will conceptualize and “break” episodes together. As a result, there will *not* be a strong focus on scene work or dialogue in this class.

There is the possibility of guest speakers and a simulated writers room exercise featuring professional writers, but most lectures will be given by the professor.

Topics may include:

- Submersion into the world of TV and expectations of a TV Showrunner
- Crafting the right sample to submit for a staffing job
- Pitching an original pilot idea
- Drafting a pilot story area and fleshing it out into an outline
- Taking an assigned idea and creating a new take/pitch
- Understanding the Writer/Producer role in TV
- How to navigate the unspoken politics in a writers room
- Breaking an episode as a group in the context of a writers room
- Character and world building in the context of network, cable and streaming
- Conceiving a pilot and arcing a first season, series vs. limited series
- Rewriting another writer’s episode
- Creating binge-worthy serialization in concert with stand-alone stories
- Incorporating producer, studio, and network notes while maintaining your vision

- How to supervise lower-level writers and give notes on episodes
- Conceiving episodes in the context of production realities
- Writing for the prep and production process – schedules & budgets
- Supervising directors, ADs, DPs and actors on set
- Taking an episode through post production – rewriting in editing
- The PR machine and a showrunner’s responsibilities to market their show

**Course Reading:**

This course will make extensive use of an online script library provided by the professor, and students will be expected to read up to two scripts a week in the first portion of the course.

**Grading Criteria:**

For written assignments students will submit work via Dropbox, yet class participation will play a role in grading. There will also be at least one exam and occasional quizzes to assess students’ absorption of recent lecture material.

Participation:	10%
Pitch Document:	20%
Midterm Exam:	30%
Outline:	20%
2 Quizzes:	20%
-----	
	100%

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. 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:**

As with in most writers rooms, cell phones will not be allowed to be used in class. Texts and calls will need to be made or received by exiting the room and not disrupting class.

Laptops will only be able to be used on specific nights when the professor will give prior acknowledgment of such. Lecture notes will need to be taken in paper.

**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, and so on.

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 Faculty.

**Class Schedule:**

Please note that all dates are subject to change at the discretion of the professor.

**WEEK #1 Aug 21:** LECTURE – The changing landscape of TV and your place in it. An engaging discussion about the differences in product created for network, cable and streaming platforms. The focus will be on crafting characters and worlds appropriate for each outlet. **Assignment:** Read 1 script from pilot library group A and 1 from group B. Complete worksheets for both, and be prepared to discuss in class. Be prepared for one impromptu quiz at some point between class #4-7. Questions will mostly consist of multiple choice, matching or fill in the blank. No essays.

**WEEK #2 Aug 28:** LECTURE & ACTIVITY – Character and world building. Using student ideas as a jumping off point, we will delve into the nuances of creating compelling characters worthy of a television series. Goals are the most obvious, but most difficult concept to truly learn to implement in story-telling. We'll take the idea to the next level by discovering how to always propel actions toward goals. We will explore the interplay between protagonists and antagonists, especially as they relate to specific worlds. Love interests and triangles are another aspect that will come into play. **Assignment:** Create an idea for a leading character and a world to pitch in the next class. Pitches will not be graded. Read 1 pilot script and complete a worksheet.

**WEEK #3 Sept 4:** No Class. Labor Day.

**WEEK #4 Sept 11:** LECTURE & ACTIVITY – Crafting a pilot to use as a sample for staffing. While most writers want to eventually sell and run their own television show,

the path usually starts as an entry-level writer on an existing series. We'll help shape student ideas to serve both as a spec to sell, and as a submission to earn a staffing position. **Assignment:** Craft a rudimentary pitch for a pilot including teaser, point of attack, mid-episode twist, satisfying set-piece, resolution, and cliff-hanger. Read 1 script and complete a worksheet.

**WEEK #5 Sept 18:** LECTURE & ACTIVITY – Arcing a full season of television. Being ready to pitch an original series involves a great deal of behind the scenes preparation. Unlike a feature project, a TV show must have a story engine and be able to sustain with unlimited twists and turns for several seasons. That means understanding the difference between episodic stories and serialized plotting. **Assignment:** Create one-sentence loglines for 3 episodes of your show and combine this with previous elements in the form of a 5-7 minute verbal pitch. Create a poster to represent your show. This will be a working document as a canvas for the next class and will not be graded.

**WEEK #6 Sept 25:** ACTIVITY – Network & Studio simulation. Playing the roles of network executive and studio heads, the class will assess each others' work in the context of different needs and audience demographics to test the viability of each as a real TV show. **Assignment:** Draft the pitch into a written story area or Pitch Doc, incorporating notes received in class. This document will be graded.

**WEEK #7 Oct 2:** LECTURE & ACTIVITY – Unspoken rules of a writers room. A writer's first experience in a professional room is exciting and a wonderful opportunity to learn. Navigating the politics in a writers room will be vital if a new writers wishes to have their initial option picked up after the trial 13 week period. Students will create their own writers' room to break selected projects from class work. **Assignment:** Create 2 more loglines for future episodes of your series to pitch to the room.

**WEEK #8 Oct 9:** LECTURE & ACTIVITY – Maintaining tension and crafting cliffhangers. Plotting can vary significantly between soap driven character dramas and procedurals. But in the evolving world of streaming, both skillsets play a role in most new shows. We will also cover the do's and don't's of running a room. If opportunity permits, professional writers will demonstrate for the class how a room really works, getting one student idea up on its feet in the form of an episode. **Assignment:**

**WEEK #9 Oct 16:** LECTURE – Tracking character emotions and actions. A conversation about plotting. Building a story to an act-out is a skill vital to survive in television writing. It has to be done in conjunction with careful attention to each character's emotional inner world. **Assignment:** In class as a room, break and outline Teaser, Act 1 and Act 5 for a pilot. This will be a working document as a canvas and will not be graded. Prepare pitches for actions and twists for Acts 2-4. Prepare for the mid-term next week.

**WEEK #10 Oct 23:** MID-TERM EXAM & LECTURE – Transitioning from writer to writer-producer. The first half of the class will be the mid-term exam, consisting of multiple choice, matching, true/false, and up to 5 short answer questions. Following will be a discussion of the role of a TV writer/producer. This means understanding casting, scheduling, and budgeting realities. We will discuss hiring and supervising directors while working with producing partners, studios and networks. We will discuss the notes process and how to stay true to a vision while working in an intensely collaborative environment. **Assignment:** In class as a room, break Acts 2-4 of the pilot. This will be

a working document and will not be graded. Be prepared for one more impromptu quiz sometime in the remaining classes.

**WEEK #11 Oct 30:** LECTURE & ACTIVITY – Supervising a room of writers. In subsequent seasons writer-producers will be required to rewrite other writers, to shepherd new talent and to act as mentors while still following the vision of their showrunner. It's a complicated and instrumental step in a writer learning how to run their own show. **Assignment:** In class as a room, finish breaking the pilot. This will be a working document and will not be graded.

**WEEK #13 Nov 6:** LECTURE & DISCUSSION – Beyond Season 1 & the prose of outlines. Getting a second season is a difficult achievement worthy of celebration. But now the real work starts. How do you keep giving audiences what they want and fulfill their expectations without stalling out and becoming repetitious? We will use student work to launch new seasons that have a fresh take but stay true to the tone and nature of the show. The second half of the class will be an interactive lecture on outlines. So much of television writing isn't in script format. Most outlines require concise prose while still keeping the economy of a good script in mind. Outlines in themselves are an artform and we'll learn how to flesh the growing document from pitch to story area to outline. **Assignment:** Flesh out another room's pilot idea. This will be a working document and will not be graded.

**WEEK #14 Nov 13:** ACTIVITY – Breaking your full pilot episode/outline in the writers room. In groups, students will work in teams to create plotlines, emotional arcs, act breaks and cliffhangers for each other's pilots. **Assignment:** Rough Outline: Individually flesh out a professional episode outline for the pilot. This assignment will not be graded, but in 2 weeks it will be turned in for the final grade after final revisions.

**WEEK #15 Nov 20:** LECTURE & ACTIVITY – Complete reconception. At this point in the semester, many students tend to throw out the bulk of their idea and need to start from scratch. This offers the class an opportunity as a group to put into action all the skills acquired throughout the term with a fresh perspective and collectively break a new concept. Should this situation not arise we will continue to work in teams on breaking the final acts of writers' pilot outlines. This group assignment is not graded.

**WEEK #16 Nov 27:** LECTURE – Guilds, Agents, Lawyers, PR. A writer has to create their own corporation and will, as a showrunner, in essence be the CEO of a multi-million dollar enterprise. It's essential to have at least a cursory knowledge of how all the moving pieces fit together. Students will be encouraged to bring questions to create an active discussion. With fresh eyes, students will rebreak each other's work as a group. Class will provide feedback on writers' outlines. Final pilot outlines are due and will be graded.

## 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](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, [policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct](https://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

### Support Systems:

*Student Health Counseling Services - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call*  
[engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling](https://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](https://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](https://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](https://equity.usc.edu), [titleix.usc.edu](https://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](https://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 Disability Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776*

[dsp.usc.edu](https://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](http://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](http://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](http://dps.usc.edu), [emergency.usc.edu](http://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](http://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](mailto: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.

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