

CTWR 489a: The Writers' Room (Straight to Series)
Writing and Producing the Episodic Drama (2 units)
Fall 2023 Monday 1-4:50 pm
SCA Room 361

PROFESSOR: Kevin Arkadie
Office Hours: By appointment
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(213) 247-8585

Suggested Reading:

Writing the TV Drama Series: How to Succeed as a Professional Writer in TV
by Pamela Douglas

The TV Writers Workbook by Ellen Sandler

Poetics by Aristotle

Student/Writers Assistant: TBA

Welcome to CTWR 489a. It's in this FALL's 15-session class that we will develop three 10-12 page episodic scripts based on the series concept tentatively titled "**AMERICAN NOBODY**," based on an idea by student Jon Lewis. The three produced episodes will replicate the *First Season* of the on-air straight-to-series production.

NOTE: This syllabus, like a script, is just a roadmap and guide for the class and there will be revisions and adjustments as the class moves forward.

In Hollywood's 600+ series universe (pre-WGA/SAG strike), straight-to-series commitments are borne from the wave of super competition mostly between deep-pocketed streaming services such as Netflix, Disney+, Amazon, AppleTV, HBO-Max, Peacock, Hulu, etc. Receiving full season orders, which producers, writers, and studios crave, allows the show creators to skip the process of writing and then producing a single script, the "pilot," and then waiting for approval on the pilot to move forward into a series commitment. For streaming platforms, the number of episodes ordered is typically 8 to 13 episodes.

This class is a collaborative workshop between Writers on the writing staff and Non-Writing Executive Producers ("NWEs or EPs") from the producing side of the class. Our EPs are invited to join the writers room for the first three class sessions to work together to determine the most fundamental elements of the series. They will have notes, observations, suggestions which, as a collaborative group, the writers will ingest, digest and disseminate

towards the best vision for the series. But at the end of the day, it will be the writers who perform the heavy lifting of writing and re-writing the episodes and finalizing the direction of the series. There will undoubtedly be debates, discussion and disagreements amongst all the creatives. As long as the creative process is moves forward constructively and respectfully, we'll find ourselves inside an incubator for great ideas.

The Writers' Room:

The writers' room will be a safe-place crucible where you will exercise and grow your "voices." The greatest resource for a writer is their personal life experiences. In the writing room you will tap into your greatest resource — your life experiences. You will learn to create internal and external Conflict, make use of Comedy, Irony, Anxiety, Abandonment, Love and maybe most importantly — Surprise. You will discover the importance of, and how to build, *Emotion* and *Specificity* into scenes, story arcs and plot lines to create binge-worthy television! One motto of note — "*write what you know, but know a lot.*" In many cases, this means research.

As much as we aim to replicate an IRL "writers room," we must remember that this is a class and a learning environment. In conjunction with the producing side of this class, the class will have two "Co-Showrunners," one from the writing side of the class and one from the producing side of the class. The Co-Showrunners' responsibility is to ensure that from story to story, draft to draft, the integrity and continuity of the concept, stories and character relationships remain true. The "writing" Co-Showrunner will be chosen in the third meeting of the Fall Semester by the Professor. Since the title of "Showrunner" is not officially recognized by the Writers Guild, it will not be included in the final credits of the production.

Along with the input from the EP's--just as in the real world--there will always be notes from the "studio" and the "network" (to be played by Gail and myself.) And in the Spring, the note-giving will expand to the various production departments and their professors, as well. You've probably all heard the phrase "*writing is rewriting.*" It's true. There will be drafts of beat sheets, outlines and scripts. The goal of each revision is to make the scripts and stories better. Simply making a draft different is not better. Better is better.

Writers Room Assistant(s)

An important position in the writers' room is the Writers Assistant. Efforts will be made to procure a student or TA to fill this position, but it is likely we'll need to fill this position from within the writers' room. The Writers Assistant notes and documents, in shorthand, all that transpires during the writers room session. At the end of the session, the writers and producers have a record where all are able to review the ideas and thoughts proposed in the meeting and *where we* landed with the specific ideas and pitches. This position is essential to an efficiently run writers room. In the absence of a dedicated Writers Assistant, individually or perhaps in pairs or even groups, every writer will take a turn at fulfilling Writers Assistant duties. We will finalize the method in our initial class. Several examples

of actual writers notes from IRL productions will be posted to the class bulletin board before the beginning of the first class.

What's the Series About:

The most important item in the early session(s) will be defining “WHAT THE SERIES IS ABOUT.” The brief concept line for “American Nobody” thus far is “*They say you can't die in your dreams...*” What's the dominant theme here? What does this say? What do you think it says powerful enough to fuel a season and even the series itself? It could be the Power of Dreams, Redemption, Injustice, Truth, Loyalty, the Power of Love, Destiny, Family, Race, the Lies We Tell—and combinations thereof.

Writing And Producing the Series

Crafting our three episodes will require writing towards a set that will be built for the series on USC stages. For budgetary and production reasons, a minimum of half of each episode will be shot on this stage. This main set may have room for swing sets. During the Fall Semester, the writers and producers will consult with the Art Department for what needs to be built and written towards for the Spring production dates.

From our writers room staff of six writers, three teams of two writers will be assigned to each of the specific three episodes to be written and produced.

Below is a timeline and overview for our Fall Semester for developing and writing the episodes of the series. This will be adjusted as needed, but at Week 15, Final Drafts of our three episodes will be delivered for a final grade for the Fall Semester and for prep for Spring production.

WEEK 1: Introductions.

General Discussion about TV Series and state of television. Discuss writers room protocols in detail. Review syllabus and discuss. Discuss initial ideas concerning “American Nobody.” Discuss work-product delivery mechanisms.

Q&A: Get inspiration and specifics from series creator Jon Lewis

Determine Alternate Meeting Dates/Times: One class per week is insufficient.

Determine by writers' room consensus on additional “meetup time” via Zoom to discuss/review assignments and to disseminate the materials to the producers and other vested parties.

Create a “system of delivery” of assignments and other written materials to be shared with relevant parties.

Video Presentation: TBD

Assignment: Research the world. Be prepared to pitch ideas in the next class. Explore central and secondary characters. Be prepared to discuss a DOMINANT THEME for the series.

WEEK 2: Workshop. Theme. Tone. The “Where, When, What, How and Why” of the world we create. Define Central Character.

Lecture: Intention, Obstacle, Conflict, Action

Assignment: Research the world. Choose a character and write a brief sketch of what drives them to action and why. Consider and be prepared to pitch the ending of the Season, as you see it.

WEEK 3: Character arcs. Characters need to end changed/different from where they began. Establish writing teams and choose Head/Writer Co-Showrunners.

Pitch “Audience Surrogate” — this is the character who will be the audience eyes, ears and entry into our world. This needs to be the character who can ask the questions the audience can’t.

Assignment: Research the world. Be prepared to pitch ideas. Take a character, create a “Beginning, Middle and End” for that character in Season 1. Be prepared to articulate the reasons for your arc.

WEEK 4:

Develop beats for Season Arc for the purpose of creating a Treatment/Season Document.

Assignment: Based on the materials presented to date, explore and be ready to pitch endings to the Season.

WEEK 5: Refine Treatment/Season Document for Season 1 season arc.

Assemble Read, Review, Adjust Season Overview (Treatment)

Assignment: Writing teams develop synopses/Beat Sheets for each of three episodes, complete with Beginning, Middle and End.

WEEK 6: Workshop synopses/Beat Sheets.

Assignment: Write Episode Outlines

WEEK 7: Workshop Episode Outlines

Assignment: Revise Episode Outlines. Scene work.

WEEK 8: Workshop Episode Outlines/Consult Art Department

Assignment: Revise Episode Outlines. Scene work.

WEEK 9: Workshop Episode Outlines with a closer eye towards production.

Assignment: Write First Drafts of Season Episodes

WEEK 10: Workshop First Drafts. Check story continuity and integrity.

Assignment: Revise Drafts

WEEK 11: Workshop First Drafts

Assignment: Revise Drafts

WEEK 12: Workshop drafts. Check story continuity and integrity. Refine dialog.

Assignment: Revise drafts.

WEEK 13: Workshop drafts. Check story continuity and integrity. Table Read. Refine dialog.

WEEK 14: Workshop drafts. Check story continuity and integrity. Table read. Refine dialog.

WEEK 15: Final Drafts of Scripts Due. Final Table Reads.

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.

Spring Semester

Time permitting in the Spring session,, you will also occasionally attend various CTPR 486 “breakout sessions” for Producers with Lead Instructor Gail Katz, and get a deep-dive look into the myriad details of television series PRODUCING: budgets, script supervising, Showrunners defining their jobs, composers discussing their craft, etc—very worthwhile. The Writers’ Room will have special break-outs when time permits (!)

Guest Speakers:

During both semesters, there may be guest speakers visiting class to discuss their roles in the straight-to-series process. These guests may include:

- Head writers and/or Showrunners from past and present series
- Successful pilot (or 1st episode) directors who can discuss straight-to-series issues
- Current programming execs from studios
- And to hear from script supervisors to learn exactly what they need to get their drafts labeled and formatted correctly...

<u>Grading Criteria:</u>	
In Class Participation*	10%
Episodic Outline	25%
First Draft	25%
Final Draft	40%
Total	100%

*In class participation includes pitching story ideas and arcs, giving and getting notes on outlines and drafts, and expressing an openness to outside notes from EP’s and “the studio.”

Professionalism:

All material is to be in proper format: including naming and dating draft of outlines and scripts, completing all drafts with proper use of scene numbers, starring changes, keeping

color pages in proper order, etc. Credit will be subtracted for grammatical and/or spelling errors, format mistakes, improperly-defined stage directions, typos, etc.

In the real world, professionals will eventually be evaluating your work—and errors are distractions to your otherwise great work—why diminish your creative gifts and reputation by delivering anything other than pristine work?

PROFESSIONALISM ALSO MEANS MEETING ALL AGREED UPON DEADLINES INCLUDING DELIVERING OUTLINES AND SUCCESSIVE EPISODIC DRAFTS ON TIME!! Should there ever be delays in delivering, an immediate communication to the receiving parties concerned must be executed.

Heads Up on Time Commitment:

Lastly, both the FALL Writers' Room course and SPRING Production course are quite demanding—the production process is particularly intense and requires deft movement, and as stated, notes will abound during pre-production as well as when cameras roll—episodes are typically shot on two weekends during 10-hour days and the writers who are also producers will also be called upon to assist other departments. Please be advised that you will be expected to deliver on all responsibilities you've been assigned to.

That's it for openers!

Let's get to work!!

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 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

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

In the beginning, important that writers and NWEPS discuss and forge ensemble the initial direction of the series, its characters, and the forward thrust of the stories. The initial sessions will be an “idea and story gymnasium” where the all possibilities of what this series would/could be about will be brought to the surface, debated. Ultimately, a direction for the series will be chosen. inclusive of the NEWPs, if they so choose to participate. Central characters will be discussed as well as central and sub plots, arcs and themes. From these early meetings the writers room will generate “beat sheets,” “character descriptions and arcs,” “plot lines and alternate plot lines” to be discussed, and whether the three episodes to be produced in the Spring will be the “first act” of the series or whether we will try to replicate in three episodes the scope of the series. Also, important to establish is the intended “tone” of the series, but that will depend on where and whom we decide the central characters are that carry the stories and the series forward.