USC School of Dramatic Arts

THTR 470: Sketch Comedy for Theatre
4 Units
Fall 2023— Mondays & Wednesdays —12-1:50pm
Location: PED 204

Instructor: Kirstin Eggers (she/her)
Email: kqeggers@usc.edu
Office: JEF 204
Zoom Office: https://usc.zoom.us/my/kirstin.sda
Office Hours: By appointment — schedule via email

Course Description

"Humor is laughing at what you haven't got when you ought to have it."
—Langston Hughes

"Comedy is a tool of togetherness. It's a way of putting your arm around someone, pointing at something, and saying, 'Isn't it funny that we do that?' It's a way of reaching out."
— Kate McKinnon

"The duty of comedy is to correct men by amusing them."
— Molière

In this experiential writing and performance workshop course, students will explore and develop their own comedic viewpoints through the medium of sketch — comedic explorations of concepts, characters and situations — through the entire process, from idea generation, to writing, revision, rehearsal, and finally production and performance of a fully realized live sketch comedy show, with an emphasis on creative collaboration and ensemble building.

Students will generate a high volume of comedic concepts and written material to serve their own creative exploration, and their own work ethic and writing practice. Students will also serve the needs of the group, and work toward building a true comedy ensemble — a mainstay of comedy success.

Although we will be working toward a final workshop presentation, this course is focused on process over product — you are not expected to be funny 100% of the time, or even 10% of the time. You are expected to be brave, be open-minded, and stretch out of your comfort zone to explore and strengthen your own unique comedic voice.

"Comedy is here to bring joy to the world, whether you want to hear the curse words or not."
— Kenan Thompson

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

1. Apply successful ensemble/partnership techniques
2. Develop written and performed material with emphasis on personal comedic voice
3. Construct original specific characters
4. Identify sketch types, sketch formats, and comedy forms
5. Generate consistent/high volumes of creative material
6. Create every aspect of an original live sketch comedy show.

Course Notes

Classes must be attended live and in-person (medical status withstanding), due to the collaborative, experiential, and performative nature of sketch comedy.

You are also expected to work, write, and rehearse with your fellow sketch comedians outside of class.

Communication
Please email me at kqeggers@usc.edu any time with questions or concerns. Emails will generally be returned within 48 hours on weekdays. I can also meet with you via my Zoom personal meeting room, or at an on-campus location as schedules allow.

I also ask that the class as a whole have a communication group, platform of your choice, so you can easily get in touch with each other.

Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required
Blackboard will be updated regularly with announcements, readings, etc. Please check often. Blackboard help for students is at studentblackboardhelp.usc.edu.

In writing sketches at the "pitch" level (fully written sketches), a scriptwriting program is recommended for your ease, but it is not necessary. Final Draft is the industry standard, and available for purchase, but Celtx also does the job and is a free download (among many others, including add-ons for Google Docs). WriterDuet is also recommended for co-writing.

It is highly likely you will need to print sketches at times — please be prepared with printing capability.

> *"When I first started doing sketch comedy, I promised myself*
> *that if I were ever to have any success in this business, I wouldn't hold back.*
> *Why get there and play it safe?" — Will Ferrell*

Required Reading
Students may be given pdfs and/or links throughout the semester which they are expected to read and retain for discussion. All readings will be posted on Blackboard.

Required Viewing
You will watch and analyze existing produced sketches, and you are encouraged to watch as many as possible. Current/recent television sketch shows include *Saturday Night Live*, *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, *I Think You Should Leave with Tim Robinson*, *That Damn Michael Che*, *Astronomy Club*, *The Iliza Shlesinger Sketch Show*, *Baroness Von Sketch Show*, *Alternatino*, *Goatface*, *Key & Peele*, *Inside Amy Schumer*, *Portlandia*, *Kroll Show*, etc.
Historical sketch shows include *The Carol Burnett Show*, *Chappelle's Show*, *The Kids In The Hall*, *Mr. Show*, *MADtv*, various Tracey Ullman, *In Living Color*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, etc.

Supplemental Reading
• *Bossypants* by Tina Fey
• *Live from New York: An Uncensored History of SNL* by Shales & Miller
• *Why Not Me* by Mindy Kaling
• *Sick in the Head: Conversations About Life and Comedy* by Judd Apatow
• *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* by Issa Rae
• *Poking A Dead Frog* by Mike Sacks

Supplemental Viewing/Watching/Listening
• Attend live sketch comedy show(s)
• Listen to *The History of Sketch Comedy* podcast with Keegan Michael Key
• Watch internet-based sketches — sites include College Humor and Funny or Die, among others. Instagram and TikTok are also great sources of modern comedic character work.
• Comedy-centered podcasts such as *WTF with Marc Maron*, *2 Dope Queens*, *Comedy Bang Bang*, etc.

> *"Wait, couldn't it be possible that other people*
> *find this just as funny as I do?"*
> *— Bowen Yang*

Description and Assessment of Assignments
Below is a general overview of the assignments. A detailed assignment description will be posted on Blackboard with ample time for each assignment.

- Ensemble In-Class Activities — Class attendance and participation is crucial for your success in this class. In addition to in-person writing, improvising, and performing during class meetings, and group viewing, analyzing and studying of sketches, you will also serve as the actors and writers FOR your teammates, so your presence is vital. Essentially, we are building a comedy troupe and every member is key.

- Character Monologues — You will write, rehearse, and perform a one minute monologue of a family member you know VERY WELL. Think of their catchphrases, physical and vocal qualities, how they carry themselves — how they walk, sit, stand, move. Your monologue should be very specific. Challenge yourself to be heightened but truthful. You will also write, rehearse, and perform two 30-second bit monologues of strangers and/or famous people. Think of their catchphrases, physical and vocal qualities, how they carry themselves — how they walk, sit, stand, move. Challenge yourself to be heightened but truthful.

- Sketch Analysis — You will present two filmed sketches (existing material, usually from television) that speak to you in some way. You will tell us why (helping to identify comedic voice), as well as analyze the sketch type, and format breakdown. A write-up of your work will be due the day you present.

- Comedy Notebook — You will keep a Comedy Notebook (format of your choice) throughout the course. This will be your personal notebook in which you record observations and ideas, but will be reviewed periodically to confirm participation. Specific notebook assignments will be announced in class. You should have daily interaction with your notebook, and it should attend every class with you.

- Midterm Franchise Character Sketch Co-Write and Presentation— You will write a character-based sketch for and with a co-creator, and present it in a practice show or film festival. This may be pre-filmed. You may also be called upon to perform in others' sketches.

- Pitch Presence — Pitch implies the submission/presentation of fully written sketches as we work toward our workshop show, for notes and rewrites. The volume of pitched sketches will be graded on a curve, based on the total number of sketches created by the class. Consistent interaction with Pitch is necessary for your success in this class.

- Final Workshop Show — Wholehearted participation in the final workshop presentation, and corresponding rehearsals, is mandatory. The final workshop presentation is scheduled for Thursday, December 1 in the Scene Dock Theatre. You must be present and participating from 6-10pm (at a minimum). The final tech/dress rehearsal will be Wednesday, November 30. You must be present and participating from 6-10pm (at a minimum).

  These dates and times are locked with no exceptions. There will also be additional outside rehearsal, with some flexibility to individual schedules. You are also expected to take on additional production duties, such as tech coordination, music compilation, costuming and prop mastery, publicity, set-up and strike, etc. Specific production assignments will be determined later in the semester.

Grading Breakdown

Assignment	% of Grade
Ensemble In-class Activities (presence, focus, attitude, willingness)	15
Character Monologues (Family, Stranger, Famous) — written and performed	10
Sketch Analysis Share	5

Comedy Notebook Completion (inc. ideas)	10
Midterm (Franchise character co-write and presentation)	15
Pitch Presence	25
Final Workshop Show (Professionalism, attitude, competence, readiness, involvement)	20
TOTAL	**100**

Grading Scale
Course final grades will be determined using the following scale:

A = 95-100 pts   B+ = 87-89 pts   C+ = 77-79 pts   D+ = 67-69 pts   F = 59 or below
A- = 90-94 pts   B = 83-86 pts   C = 73-76 pts   D = 63-66 pts
                  B- - 80-82 pts   C- = 70-72 pts   D- = 60-62 pts

Assignment Submission Policy
Written sketches or performance assignments do not need to be posted on Blackboard unless otherwise specified, but you must be ready to share the writing in class (if applicable).

Grades will generally be posted to Blackboard within a week. If you fail to complete an assignment, it will show on Blackboard Grade Center — I cannot follow up with you to ask about missing assignments.

Course Content Distribution and Synchronous Session Recordings Policies
USC has policies that prohibit recording and distribution of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment. (Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook, page 13).

This includes filming or recording of instructor and/or classmates without the explicit permission of all involved.

Academic Integrity
The University of Southern California is foremost a learning community committed to fostering successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Academic misconduct is in contrast to the university's mission to educate students through a broad array of first-rank academic, professional, and extracurricular programs and includes any act of dishonesty in the submission of academic work (either in draft or final form).

This course will follow the expectations for academic integrity as stated in the USC Student Handbook. All students are expected to submit assignments that are original work and prepared specifically for the course/section in this academic term. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s). Students suspected of engaging in academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Other violations of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see the student handbook or the Office of Academic Integrity's website, and university policies on Research and Scholarship Misconduct.

Use of AI Generators

You may wish to use AI (e.g., ChatGPT and image generation tools) in this class. Learning to use AI is an emerging skill, and I welcome the opportunity to meet with you to provide guidance with these tools during office hours or after class. Keep in mind the following:

- AI tools are permitted to help you brainstorm topics or revise work you have already written.
- If you provide minimum-effort prompts, you will get low-quality results. You will need to refine your prompts to get good outcomes. This will take work.
- AI is a tool, but one that you need to acknowledge using. Please include notes at the end of any assignment that uses AI explaining how (and why) you used AI and indicate/specify the prompts you used to obtain the results what prompts you used to get the results. Failure to do so is a violation of academic integrity policies.
- Be thoughtful about when AI is useful. Consider its appropriateness for each assignment or circumstance.

Learning Experience Evaluation

Learning Experience Evaluation occurs at the end of the semester university-wide. It is an important review of students' experience in the class. You should expect to receive an email update once the system has launched to provide your feedback on this course. In addition, you are always welcome to connect with me as the instructor to offer any feedback on the course.

Attendance

Being absent, late, or leaving early disturbs the important ensemble nature of this class. Missing or being late to class will affect in-class activity points, and you will miss out on writing pairings, and casting.

However, your health and the health of our community eclipses all. If your health status precludes you from attending class in-person, I will attempt to conduct class as hybrid, and request you attend class LIVE (via Zoom) with Camera On. I will not open the Zoom classroom unless you notify me via email before class begins. Travel and other scenarios are not grounds for attending via Zoom. Do not attend class in-person if you have symptoms of a virus. If you are not sure, please wear a mask.

Extracurricular activities do not excuse you from class work. Activities that have been officially sanctioned by the larger university are exempt, with pre-submitted official documentation. See SDA Statement on Productions, ISPs, and Extra-Curricular Commitments below.

Classroom Norms

Devices — Cell phones and other electronic devices should be left on silent in your backpack/bag, away from your work in class. This is to encourage your focus, mindfulness, and respect to your peers. Unauthorized use of cell phones in class will negatively affect your in-class activity points for the day. For in-class writing, you may use your laptop, although I encourage you to experiment with both typed and handwritten work.

Attire — Sketch comedy is physical and can get sweaty; dress accordingly. Your clothing and shoes should allow you to move freely and comfortably. Shoes should be closed-toed and stay on your feet — no flip-flops. If hair gets in your face, secure it back. Hats are generally discouraged.

Eating — Food and drink is not permitted during any class. Absolutely no gum.

Break — We generally do not take an official break during the 110 minutes of class; please be prepared to stay in the room, actively participating. In the event of an emergency for which you must leave the room, observe theatre rules of being discrete and respectful to your fellow actors (i.e. do not enter or leave the room while others are performing).

Strike — You are expected to restore the classroom to neutral at the end of each class.

"To make comedy, maybe you just have to work hard and be funny." — Tina Fey

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown
Please note: due to the fluid and creative nature of this course, weekly structure will change to accommodate the needs of individuals and the ensemble. You will be informed of any changes as much as possible.

Classes may begin with warm-ups, depending on the nature of the day's work.

	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
1	Mon Aug 21	Welcome/introductions/ syllabus review. Intro to sketch via improv. Intro to Comedy Notebook.		DUE WEDNESDAY: Write a 1 minute monologue of a family member you know VERY WELL. Think of how they walk, sit, stand, move, talk — specificity is key.
	Wed Aug 23	Family monologues performed and explored.	Write and perform a 1 minute monologue of a family member you know VERY WELL.	Comedy Notebook Assignment. Read Vox article "Comedy's Existential Crisis" for discussion.
2	Mon Aug 28	Stranger/famous monologues performed and explored. Discussion: comedy boundaries and modern comedy.	Read Vox article "Comedy's Existential Crisis" for discussion.	Comedy Notebook Assignment. For Wednesday: Observe two strangers or two famous people (or mix & match). Write two 30 second monologues playing each — what is happening to them that day? Be specific. The funny is in the details.
	Wed Aug 30	In-class writing/ improvising.	Write and perform two 30 second monologues (bits) playing a stranger or famous person.	Begin to select two existing sketches that speak to you, for Sketch Share. Comedy Notebook Assignment.
3	Mon Sep 4	LABOR DAY — NO CLASS		
	Wed Sep 6	In-class monologue writing. Begin sketch types.		Comedy Notebook Assignment — sketch type ideas.
4	Mon Sep 11	In class writing/ improvising. Sketch types, cont'd.		Comedy Notebook Assignment — sketch type ideas.
	Wed Sept 13	In class writing/ improvising. Sketch types, cont'd.		Comedy Notebook Assignment — sketch type ideas.
5	Mon Sep 18	In-class writing/ improvising. Sketch Structure.		Select and analyze two existing sketches that speak to you, to share in class. Turn in written analysis on Blackboard before class.
	Wed Sep 20	Sketch Analysis Share.	Sketch Analysis Share. Written analysis turned in to Blackboard before class.	

	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
6	Mon Sep 25	ASYNCHRONOUS CLASS — viewing and discussion of secondary sketches via Blackboard.		Up to date on sketch ideas.
	Wed Sep 27	Sketch idea speed dating. Paired writing practice.	30+ sketch ideas, as expressed in Comedy Notebook.	Write a practice sketch! Paired. Franchise character ideas.
7	Mon Oct 2	See sketch first drafts. Franchise characters writers' room. Begin supported co-writes for franchise characters.	Present first draft of practice sketches. Franchise character idea and presentation — favorite and a back-up.	First drafts of franchise character sketch/monologue co-writes (your own character AND head writer).
	Wed Oct 4	Midterm character sketch PITCH.	Full written first drafts of franchise character sketch.	Rewrite midterm sketches from notes.
8	Mon Oct 9	Rehearse midterm character sketches.	Final draft of character sketches.	Rehearse midterm character sketches.
	Wed Oct 11	MIDTERM: presentation of franchise character sketches, written/rehearsed outside of class. Notes.	DUE TODAY: Midterm "practice show." All sketches rehearsed and performed.	Begin sketch writing for pitch!
9	Mon Oct 16	Midterm reflection. Review pitch formatting. Begin pitch.	Sketches written, copies printed and given to cast, presented for feedback/rewriting.	Sketch writing for pitch!
9-12	Wed Oct 18 - Mon Nov 6	Pitch.	Sketches written, copies printed and given to cast, presented for feedback/rewriting.	Sketch writing for pitch!
12	Wed Nov 8	Pitch/rewrite/rehearse for show. Assign auxiliary roles. Narrow down for show.		Rewrites as needed.
13-14	Mon Nov 13 - Mon Nov 20	Rewrite/rehearse for show.		Rewrites as needed.
14	Wed Nov 22	THANKSGIVING BREAK — NO CLASS		
15	Mon Nov 27	Rehearse for show. All tech final collection.		Prep for show.
	Tue Nov 28	Possible additional rehearsal.		

	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
	Wed Nov 29	12pm REHEARSE 6pm TECH/DRESS REHEARSAL	All sketches off-book and rehearsed. All costumes/props secured and approved. All tech aspects ready.	Prep for show.
	Thu Nov 30	SHOW! 7:30pm (calltime TBA)	Show ready!	
Final	**FRIDAY DECEMBER 8 — 11am-1pm**	Post-mortem!		Happy Winter Break!

"Everybody needs some good sketch comedy."
— Bob Odenkirk

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SDA Statements On…

Productions, ISPs, and Extra-Curricular Commitments

SDA productions, ISPs and extracurricular activities* do not excuse you from any class work. There will be no exceptions made for absences in class, missed or delayed assignments, homework or lack of class participation resulting from your involvement in any of the above. Your grade will reflect your work in this class, independent from work in any other class or activity.

(*Activities that have been officially sanctioned by the larger university are exempt. You must submit official documentation to your professor regarding your participation in an event prior to your absence.)

Student Support & Reporting Form

To facilitate a supportive environment of accountability, SDA has created an internal system of reporting for students to address issues/concerns and to offer feedback or suggestions for improvement. This mechanism provides a pathway for reporting and offering feedback without fear of retaliation or judgment. Any submission filed through this form will be reviewed and processed accordingly through SDA Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. To file a report, please visit: https://bit.ly/SDAstudentreporting

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion + Intimacy in Theater Consent Culture

Through our pluralistic approach of diverse pedagogies, methodologies, ideologies, and modalities of artistic expression, we invite (engage) and challenge students to expand their breadth and depth of knowledge, complexity, and range of the human experience. Even though we nurture, guide, and challenge our students to embrace the unknown or unfamiliar and step outside of their comfort zones through storytelling/art, we aim to practice effective strategies and offer tools to students mindful of their physical, psychological, social, and emotional wellbeing. In alignment with professional and industry standards, we will integrate core principles and techniques of Intimacy in Theater and Building Cultures of Affirmative Consent. This will provide agency, offer resources and support to the teachers, students, directors, and staff to establish healthy boundaries of consent when working on material that is physically, intimately, or emotionally charged content in both the classroom and production.

USC Statements On…

Academic Integrity

The University of Southern California is a learning community committed to developing successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the dissemination of ideas. Academic misconduct, which includes any act of dishonesty in the production or submission of academic work, compromises the integrity of the person who commits the act and can impugn the perceived integrity of the entire university community. It stands in opposition to the university's mission to research, educate, and contribute productively to our community and the world.

All students are expected to submit assignments that represent their own original work, and that have been prepared specifically for the course or section for which they have been submitted. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s).

Other violations of academic integrity include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), collusion, knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university. All incidences of academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see the student handbook or the Office of Academic Integrity's website, and university policies on Research and Scholarship Misconduct.

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment, or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

Students and Disability Accommodations

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. The Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Support Systems

Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call
Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call
The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX (EEO-TIX) - (213) 740-5086
Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298
Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

The Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) - (213) 740-0776
OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

USC Campus Support and Intervention - (213) 740-0411
Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion - (213) 740-2101
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 – 24/7 on call
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) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call
Non-emergency assistance or information.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)
A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu
Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.