

**School of Cinematic Arts The John Wells Division of
Writing for Screen and Television
WRITING THE ORIGINAL SITUATION COMEDY PILOT CTWR 437
#19226
Spring 2024**

Instructor: Rob Turbovsky (email: turbovsk@usc.edu)

Class schedule: Tuesdays 7pm – 10:00pm

Class Location: SCA 362

Office Hours: Before and after class and by appointment

COURSE OBJECTIVE:

The course objective is to gain a character-focused understanding of the TV comedy pilot and its function in today's TV landscape. Over the course of the semester, you will write, rewrite, and polish an original comedy pilot that will serve as the final for the class as well as a viable sample of your writing.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

An introduction and guide to crafting a half hour comedy pilot script.

COURSE READING:

There is no textbook but various pilot scripts from existing shows will be assigned based on students' interests.

COURSE EVALUATION:

Students will be evaluated based on their attendance, participation, and adherence to deadlines. Scripts are expected to be written in industry-standard Final Draft format – please do not adjust margins or font sizes, even subtly, to hit a certain page count. Beat sheets/outlines and other non-script written assignments can be written in Final Draft or Word. Scripts will be evaluated based on their format, structure, and how the writer addresses notes given throughout the process. As in the professional world, typos and grammatical/formatting errors will be noted and will affect your grade if they are excessive and uncorrected.

All written assignments unless otherwise specified are due by 7pm on the

Sunday before class. Except when excused in advance, missed deadlines will result in a half-letter grade deduction (i.e. A to A-).

A FEW NOTES ABOUT THIS WORKSHOP:

A comedy writers room is a unique environment. In order to function best, there needs to be a feeling of mutual respect, trust, and creative freedom, including the freedom to share personal stories (or not) and the freedom to pitch bad ideas (a freedom I encourage you to take advantage of). We are here to support each other. Read and engage with your classmates' work and come in with suggestions for them just as you'd want them to do for you. The more we work to help our fellow writers, the more they will work to help us. To this end, it is absolutely vital that what is shared in the room stays in the room.

We will be reading scripts aloud during our workshops with your fellow students assuming various roles. This is a highly effective technique for improving and understanding dialogue and scene structure. You will not be graded on "performance quality," but if you are uncomfortable reading aloud, please let me know.

BASIS FOR DETERMINING FINAL GRADE:

10% participation
 10% story pitches
 20% story outline
 15% first draft
 15% second draft
 30% final draft
 TOTAL: 100%

As per Writing Division policy the following is the breakdown of the 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%

INTERNET/COMPUTER/PHONE/RECORDING POLICY:

Please do not record lectures or use any electronic devices during class without prior consent. Research has shown “the mere presence of a smartphone” can be distracting. Computers may be used for note-taking/script reading purposes only.

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 equals 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.

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.

SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNMENTS:

WEEK 1: Jan 9th – THE BEGINNING

Introductions and syllabus review

The elements of half-hour comedy – types of shows/pilots and shifting tones in the streaming era

The value of an original pilot script.

The original pilot as sample vs the pilot as series sales tool.

Getting out of the script pile.

The “voice” of the writer.

Crafting a draft from outline to polished script.

Story and Character. How specific shows tell specific types of story through their characters.

ASSIGNMENT:

Read the assigned sitcom pilot.

Write capsule biographies of the (top three) major characters in the script– maximum length 100 words each, highlighting their strengths, flaws, attitudes, conflicts, etc.

Read David Mamet’s “Memo to The Unit Writing Staff” (language warning):
<https://screencraft.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/David-Mamet-Memo.pdf>

Brainstorm three separate general ideas for your original pilot. These can be very loose notions about a character (“I want to write a show about a messy janitor”) or a world (“I want to write a show set in the world of single-cell

organisms”) or a premise (“I want to write about a dog who becomes a Senator”). Be prepared to discuss these next week.

WEEK 2: Jan 16th – CONFLICT IS CHARACTER

Discuss the main conflict and resolution of the assigned pilot script. What is the importance of conflict? Roots of conflict in a story.

Discuss pilot ideas – what makes a promising idea/story and what makes an interesting character

Create a story from personal experience. How a story explains a character. Why the best stories are all about character and not about story.

ASSIGNMENT: Choose and expand one of your ideas into a paragraph-length story.

WEEK 3: Jan 23rd - WORKING THE STORY

How different shows tell different stories. What a show is “about.”

Continuation of the pitch process. Restructuring stories. Discuss B and C stories. Theme as a story unifier.

Introduction of the Beat Sheet.

ASSIGNMENT: Prepare beat sheet of your story. (Example provided)

WEEK 4: Jan 30th - STORY TIME

Workshop of Beat Sheets – patrolling for “buts” and “ands.” The imperative to always be escalating.

Audience identification and the rooting interest.

What an "Act" needs to accomplish to be an Act.

Following the story to a clear, satisfying ending. Pitch B and C stories

Explanation of an outline, review of a sample outline. Adding jokes, dialogue, etc.

ASSIGNMENT: Write outline of your script.

(NOTE: Each student will make an individual appointment with the instructor to discuss their story.)

WEEK 5: Feb 6th - THE OUTLINE

Discussion and review of story outlines. Finding characters' voices and establishing your guideposts: "What would really happen?"

ASSIGNMENT: Refine and polish outlines.

WEEK 6: Feb 13th – THE WRITER’S ROOM

The Writers Room

Writers Room Terminology

Pitching Do's and Don't: Specifics, areas, fixes, plusses, repitches.

Writers Room Psychology: Overcoming defensiveness/anxiety/fear.

General notes on outlines from instructor. Group work on outlines.

Goals of the vomit draft

Assign A and B groups

ASSIGNMENT: Group A: write Act 1 of vomit draft.

WEEK 7: Feb 20th – EVALUATING THE VOMIT DRAFT

Class review and reading of Act 1 (Group A)

ASSIGNMENT:

Group A: Refine Act 1 Begin Act 2

Group B: Begin Act 1

WEEK 8: Feb 27th - BUILDING A RESOLUTION

What makes a great ending for a pilot? Unexpected, inevitable, expansive.

Class review and reading of Act 1 (Group B)

ASSIGNMENT:

Group A: Finish vomit draft.

Group B: Refine Act 1. Begin Act 2.

WEEK 9: March 5th - WRITING IS RE-WRITING**The Re-Outline**

The keys to rewriting – purpose, intention, instinct, and mastering “causality.”

Heightening motivation.

Adding obstacles to the protagonist's want. Continue review of Group A vomit drafts.

ASSIGNMENT:

Group A: Re-outline first draft

Group B: Finish vomit draft

SPRING BREAK: March 11th - 17th**WEEK 10: March 19th – REVISIONS, CONTINUED**

A focus on pace, rhythm and tone.

Compare current series first drafts to the AS BROADCAST draft. Review

Group B vomit drafts.

ASSIGNMENT:

Group A: Begin second draft

Group B: Re-outline first draft

WEEK 11: March 26th – ROOM RE-WRITES

Room re-writing on second drafts (Group A).

ASSIGNMENT:

Group A: Continue second draft.

Group B: Begin second draft.

WEEK 12: April 2nd – ROOM RE-WRITES, CONT.

Room re-writing on second drafts (Group B).

ASSIGNMENT:

Group A: Complete second draft.

Group B: Continue second draft.

WEEK 13: April 9th – A GUIDE TO POLISHING

Jokes and joke-writing strategies

Writing to the top of the audience's intelligence

Punch up of Group A selected jokes/scenes

ASSIGNMENT:

Group A: Begin polish

Group B: Complete second draft.

WEEK 14: April 16th – PITCHING YOUR IDEA

A guide to the pitch – in the room, in the meeting, and beyond

Polishing, continued.

Punch up of Group B selected jokes/scenes

ASSIGNMENT:

Group A: Continue polish.

Group B: Begin polish

WEEK 15: April 23rd - HOW TO BE A COMEDY WRITER

Possible guest speaker

Practical comedy industry advice

The writing staff, jobs, titles, responsibilities, and any other questions you might have

FINAL ASSIGNMENT DUE: Turn in completed script by 12pm on APRIL 30th.

Please note - dates and subjects can change at the discretion of the instructor.

MEDIA:

Suggestions for scripts to read and DVD viewing will be given on a group and

individual basis. It is in the best interest of the class that everyone is familiar with the series being discussed.

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 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/sssa
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