

School of Cinematic Arts
The John Wells Division of Writing for Screen and Television
CTWR 477: Staff Writing the Sketch Comedy Show
Spring 2024 / 4 Units

Professor: Mike Gibbons

Class Schedule: Mondays – 1:00 to 4pm and Fridays* 4pm-10pm

Class Location: Zemeckis Bldg. Visual Effects Lab 177

Office Hours: Before and after class

Contact Information: Mike Gibbons, mgibbons@usc.edu

DA: Aidan Woodall awoodall@usc.edu

*Friday classes are only in the weeks when we have our shows (3 times in the semester).

Course Objective

To introduce and teach students concepts and skills in writing and producing sketch comedy culminating with the production of three LIVE sketch comedy shows in front of a studio audience.

Course Description

This course is designed to educate students on the techniques of writing a humorous sketch as well as producing a sketch comedy show.

This is a 15- instructional week course. Maximum enrollment is 12 writers.

The class meets Mondays from 1pm to 4pm. There are also 3 Friday night sessions. Formats for the scenes are multi-camera filmed sketches as well as short comedic pre-shot films developed and rehearsed in conjunction with CTPR 499 “Directing the Comedy Sketch Show.” The Trojan Vision class [CTPR 409] will take on the technical duties for the 3 dress rehearsals and 3 live shows.

The first four weeks of this course will focus on the techniques of creating and writing a comedy sketch. The first half of each class instruction will be devoted to a discussion of techniques further detailed in the course content section of this syllabus. The second half of each class instruction will focus on student application and demonstration of those skills discussed; with analysis and critique from the instructor and class as a whole.

The remaining weeks of the course will involve collaboration with directing, acting and Trojan Vision students in rehearsing and producing three LIVE sketch comedy half-hours.

Recommended Reading and Viewing

Comedy Writing for Late-Night TV: How to Write Monologue Jokes, Desk Pieces, Sketches, Parodies, Audience Pieces, Remotes, and Other Short-Form Comedy, by Joe Toplyn.

Poking a Dead Frog, by Mike Sacks

Live From New York: The Complete, Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live as Told by Its Stars, Writers, and Guests by James Andrew Miller and Tom Shales

The instructor will send out lists of sketches available on the Internet to watch after we meet for the first time. Below are some of the better known sketch shows. Numerous websites rank the best sketches from them. It is recommended you familiarize yourself with the strongest examples from these shows.

- Saturday Night Live
- Mr. Show
- Kids in the Hall
- A Black Lady Sketch Show
- The Catherine Tate Show
- I Think You Should Leave
- Tim and Eric, Awesome Show, Great Job!
- Portlandia
- SCTV
- Little Britain
- Key & Peele
- Monty Python

Evaluation of Student Performance

Participation: 10%

Completing assignments: 50% (12 assignments at approx 4% each)

Using critique/feedback in rewrites: 20%

Completed portfolio/packet: 20%

The following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:

A 100% to 94%

A- 93% to 90%

B+ 89% to 87%

B 86% to 83%
B- 82% to 80%
C+ 79% to 77%
C 76% to 73%
C- 72% to 70%
D+ 69% to 67%
D 66% to 63%
F 59% to 0%

Writing Division Attendance Policy and Impact on Grade

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 will hold up the business of the class. Please make your best effort to be on time. 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

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 Faculty.

Course Content

NOTE: Weekly assignments and course content can be adjusted per the needs of the instruction and the upcoming shows. Each student will have at least 1 sketch in one of the three live shows.

All sketches assigned and written for the course will be considered for the LIVE sketch comedy show. Assignments must be turned in as Final Draft files (.fdx). They're due Fridays by midnight on Blackboard unless otherwise specified.

1/8/24 - Class 1 – Introduction

Orientation. All classes meet together (Ron Howard stage, Zemeckis Bldg.) Discuss how this class will prepare students for “real world” sketch comedy TV. After that, the writing students will meet apart from the other classes. Then we'll meet again with the actors to start to get a feel for their individual energies.

Topics Covered:

- Suggested software and formatting
- Basic terms: who-what-where, game/reveal/turn, beats/heightening, button/blow
- What makes a good idea for a sketch? Pet peeves, real life, genres
- An example outline for a basic sketch

Writing assignment: Write 2 sketches for us to read with the actors next week. Can be rough, but must be a full sketch. Also pitch a sketch you'd like the class to watch.

These sketches should be **NO MORE THAN 6 PAGES!** (They can be shorter.) And they must be producible in terms of props, cast, and sets within our means.

Since there is a holiday next week, I may give you notes and ask for a rewrite on your sketches which will be due Friday 1/19/24 to mgibbons@usc.edu.

1/15/24 - MLK Day - No Class

1/22/24 - Class 2 – Types of Sketches

We dig into some common types of sketches.

Topics Covered:

- Slice of life
- Character sketch
- Genre Parody

Writing Assignment: Write two more sketches, each of which should clearly be one of the categories we discussed. Also rewrite one or more sketches you want to keep in contention for the show. Watch the sketches suggested by other students. Material is due Friday 1/19/24 to mgibbons@usc.edu.

1/29/24 - Class 3 – Character Sketches

Write a sketch that showcases a character. Write a sketch meant for a particular actor.

Topics covered:

- Inspired by people you know
- Beginning with a physicality
- Beginning with a voice
- Beginning with a phrase / philosophy

Writing Assignment: Write two character sketches. Have an actor in mind from our cast for one of them. Rewrite one or more previous sketches based on the classes' suggestions.

2/5/24 - Class 4 – Techniques and Heightening

We explore common techniques for making your sketch stronger.

Topics covered:

- Relatability
- Patterns and repetition
- Specificity of language
- Clarity
- Voice of reason
- Your voice

This week, we select which sketches are in the show.

Writing Assignment: Write two sketches where the focus is on heightening. Also rewrite one or more other sketches.

Writer's block and how to fight it.

2/12/24 - Class 5 – Prep for Show 1

Table read / Rehearsal and Run Thru of Original Sketches

-All classes meet together. Reading and rehearsal of original sketches for Show 1. Writing notes, directing notes, acting notes. -We will rehearse with the guest host. Cold opening and monologue will be assigned, and revised right up to:

2/16/24 - Show 1 (Friday night)

2/19/24 - President's Day - No Class

2/26/24 - Class 6 – Post show discussion

Discuss sketches from show and pitch ideas to improve. Read new sketches.

Writing assignment: Write or revise 2+ sketches.

How to create a Franchise Character.

-Table read and stage/rehearse sketches.

-Creating a character with a comedic point of view.

-Assignment: Create a Franchise Sketch Character. Write two sketches for that character. Review Last week's homework, and revise sketches based on notes.

3/4/23 - Class 7 – Indulge Yourself

Discuss: what kind of sketches do you love doing? Any "guilty pleasure" types of sketch? Some like to list a million specifics, other prefer irrational characters, some like commenting on issues of the day. What do you love?

Writing assignment: Write or revise a sketch and write another new sketch based on the talents of the cast.

3/11/24 - SPRING BREAK - No Class

3/18/24 - Class 8 – Unique Voices

We discuss some sketches that show a unique sensibility. Have there been any sketches you've written that really feel like "you?"

Writing assignment: Write or revise 2+ sketches.

3/25/24 - Class 9 – Prep for Show 2.

All classes meet together. Reading and rehearsal of original sketches for Show 2. Writing notes, directing notes, acting notes.

Writing assignment: Revise sketches from the show, plus bring in one new sketch.

3/29/24 - Show 2 (Friday night)

4/1/24 - Class 10 – Post show discussion

Discuss sketches from show and pitch ideas to improve. Read new sketches.

Writing assignment: Write or revise 2+ sketches.

4/8/24 - Class 11 – Read Sketches

We read the new and revised sketches and offer notes.

Writing assignment: Write or revise 2+ sketches.

4/15/24 - Class 12 – Prep for Show 3

All classes meet together. Reading and rehearsal of original sketches for Show 3. Writing notes, directing notes, acting notes.

Writing assignment: Revise sketches from the show, plus pitch another sketch for class to watch.

4/19/24 - Show 3 (Friday night)

4/22/24 - Class 13 – Post show discussion

Analyzing sketches suggested by students

We discuss the class' pick of sketches. We discuss each students' sketch packet.

Writing assignment: Assemble and sequence your sketch packet.

4/29/24 - Class 14 – Watching tapes of live shows

We'll watch the tapes of one or more live shows.

Writing assignment: Do whatever is necessary to complete your packet (formatting, combining into one document, any changes you wish).

5/6/24 - Class 15 – Individual focus of what each student could focus on next.

The instructor leads a discussion of each students' strengths over the semester.

Missing an Assignment Deadline, Incompletes

The only acceptable excuses for missing an assignment deadline or taking an incomplete in the course are personal illness or a family emergency. Students must inform the professor before the assignment due date and present verifiable evidence in order for a make-up to be scheduled. Students who wish to take incompletes must also present documentation of the problem to the instructor or teaching assistant before final grades are due.

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.

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"

<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,

<http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

PLEASE NOTE:

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

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

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, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 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.