School of Cinematic Arts
The John Wells Division of Writing for Screen and Television
Advanced Half-Hour Television Comedy
CTWR 534: Section 19253D
Fall 2024 / 2.0 Units

Professor: Mike Gibbons
Class Schedule: Wednesdays – 7pm to 10pm
Class Location: SCA 361
Office Hours: Before and after class
Contact Information: Mike Gibbons, mgibbons@usc.edu
Corequisite: CTWR 514a

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course will teach how to conceive, develop, write, critique and punch up a Spec Episode of a current half hour comedy series. By the end of the course each student will have completed a professional-quality spec script. On the first day of class we will choose two existing sitcoms to spec.

COURSE OBJECTIVE:

• Learn the structure of a half-hour television comedy script.
• Follow the industry standards for creating a beat sheet, outline and draft.
• Gain experience giving thoughtful, constructive verbal and written feedback,
and receiving criticism, as well as addressing notes in rewrites.
• Learn to identify the "voices" and attitudes of existing characters, maintain
consistency, build on existing storylines, relationships and attitudes when
developing stories and writing scripts.
• Gain experience working in an improvisational manner.
• Develop a solution-based approach to solving structure problems.
• Practice working in the cooperative style of a TV writers' room.
• Demonstrate professional work habits regarding deadlines, in the room and on the page.

COURSE READING:

There is no textbook for this course. Students are encouraged to mindfully watch all of the programs being discussed in class and to read scripts, some of which will be distributed by the instructor. Occasional essays, articles, and television episodes will be assigned when relevant to topics covered in class.

COURSE EVALUATION:

Students will be evaluated based on their attendance, participation, written work, 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 structure, format, accuracy to the "voice of the show," and if the writer addressed notes given throughout the process where appropriate. 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 are to be sent as **pdfs.**
With the exception of scripts, assignments should be double-spaced, with 1.5 inch L & R margins.
All script assignments must be typed in **12 Point Courier Font** -- which is the screenwriting industry standard. Non-scripted writing assignments (stories, outlines) can be typed in Times New Roman.
All File names must follow this format:
Last name - SHOW assignment date
(Gibbons-LASSO beat sheet 8/12/24, Sorkin-WWDITS rev outline 9/1/24)

FINAL SCRIPT grading standards: The Final Draft will be assessed for the following qualities: Basic writing rules: Does it realize the promise of the Story Outline?
Is the story and structure within the style and template of the series? Are the voices of the characters true to the original series? Is the draft correct in structure, form and professional appearance?

BASIS FOR DETERMINING FINAL GRADE:

15% participation
15% story pitches
25% story outline
10% first act
10% second act
25% final draft

Per Writing Division policy, the following is the breakdown of the numeric grade to letter grade:

A	94% - 100%	C	73% - 76%
A-	90% - 93%	C-	70% - 72%
B+	87% - 89%	D+	67% - 69%
B	83% - 86%	D	63% - 66%
B-	80% - 82%	D-	60% - 62%
C+	77% - 79%	F	0 - 59%

EXPECTATION OF PROFESSIONALISM:

Be on time, come to all classes, participate in class discussion, read and critique your own and fellow students' work, complete all in-class assignments and complete all outside assignments.

The class will duplicate as much as possible the atmosphere of a professional "writers' room" of a sit- com during production. Students will function as the equivalent of a professional writing staff, with the instructor filling the role of "show-runner." As with a real sitcom staff, the class will have the opportunity to offer constructive criticism of each other's work. Students will also participate in group rewrites, where they will be expected to help "punch up" material submitted by fellow students. A portion of each student's script will be read aloud at least once during the course in the equivalent of a sitcom "table read." It is therefore very important to attend each and every class.

Even if you cannot make a class, you must post homework on Blackboard or have someone hand in your homework for you. The delivery of late or incomplete assignments without appropriate excuse will lower your grade one grade point per assignment.

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 – 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.

PLEASE NOTE: It is understood that ideas shared or "pitched" in class will be free to be used by the class. Students who pitch suggestions to other students do so with the understanding that authorship goes to the recipient. This is in keeping with the Writers Guild of America accepted tradition of writing "in the room" and "tabling a script" for a sitcom. Sharing of ideas benefits the learning process and all students as a whole. Students should think of the class as a giant support group ready and willing to nurture their creative spirit. Notwithstanding the above, see Academic Integrity policy noted below.

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. Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the internet.

WRITING DIVISION ATTENDANCE POLICY:

Timely attendance is mandatory and failure to attend all class sections from beginning to end may affect grades.

- Exemptions will be allowed on a case-by-case basis and must be supported by a written accommodation request from the USC Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS).

- Students who become ill and need to self-isolate will be supported in their efforts to stay current with classwork and assignments. Faculty are no longer required to provide an option for students to zoom into class. However, Faculty may choose to use zoom at their discretion in an effort to help students stay current in their course work.

Students must contact the professor or SA 24 hours prior to class start time if they need to miss class for any reason.

SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNMENTS

WEEK 1 – AUGUST 28: THE BLANK PAGE

Introductions, then some awkward ice breakers and then a syllabus review.

The elements of half-hour comedy – types of shows and shifting tones in the streaming era
The two parts of television comedy writing: the page and the room.
The spec – what a spec can demonstrate.
The spec as staffing tool.
Good specs, bad specs, weird specs.
Spec script options discussed and shows chosen.
Discuss Structure – Story DNA, examples

Dan Harmon's "Story Circle" https://blog.reedsy.com/guide/story-structure/dan-harmon-story-circle/
South Park Outline Advice https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGUNqq3jVLg
David Mamet's "Memo to *The Unit* Writing Staff" (language warning):
https://screencraft.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/David-Mamet-Memo.pdf

Screen episode of a sitcom. (Story comes from character)

ASSIGNMENTS:
Start watching shows (at least the pilot and most recent two) everyone else is writing so you can critique intelligently.

Choose the show for which you plan to write your spec. For next class, make a reverse beat sheet for a recent episode of that show. Note the Act structure. Be ready to discuss the characters and their traits.

-----WE DO NOT MEET ON SEPTEMBER 4-----

WEEK 2 – SEPTEMBER 11: THE PITCH

Review Beat Sheets.
What would be the logline for that story?
What makes a promising idea?
Pitching discussion — how does it work in the real world? Tips.

Creating a story from personal experience. Finding stories that resonate. Why the best stories are all about character and not about plot.
Conflict is comedy: why conflict is necessary for story and vital for comedy.
In-class screening of an episode from one of the shows assigned in Week 1.
In-class reading of an episode from the other chosen series.
Discussion of the main conflict of the episode and its development.
A class pitch session of spec ideas for these episodes. Want/Need
Story Checklist

ASSIGNMENTS:
For next class, bring written pitches for free-standing A, B and C stories (at least 3 of each).
PITCH: Main character(s) has a problem/goal/obstacle(s). Have a beginning (set-up), middle (complication/escalation) and end (resolution).

WEEK 3 – SEPTEMBER 18: THE BEAT SHEET

Hear pitches and develop stories.
Select those ready to move on to beat sheets (Group A).
Integrating A, B and C stories.
Loglines vs. stories vs. themes.
Beat Sheets vs Outlines
Story Structure Checklist

ASSIGNMENTS:
GROUP A — Beat sheets. 2 pages. Emphasis on creating cohesive
structure for A, B & C stories (keep storylines separate for now).
GROUP B — Revise and expand pitches

WEEK 4 – SEPTEMBER 25: THE OUTILNE

Hear GROUP B pitches and select stories for Beat Sheets.
Address questions about beat sheets, interweaving stories.

Review GROUP A Beat Sheets with discussion & feedback. Patrol for "buts" and "ands."
The Writers Room
Writers Room Terminology
Writers Room Psychology: Overcoming defensiveness/anxiety/fear.
Discuss ½ Hour Outlines

ASSIGNMENTS:
GROUP B - Beat sheets. 2 pages. Emphasis on creating cohesive structure for A, B & C stories (keep storylines separate for now).
GROUP A – Either revise beat sheet or write full outline (5-7 pages.)

WEEK 5 – OCTOBER 2: DO NOT UNDERESTIMATE THE OUTLINE

Possible Guest Speaker on taking outline to script.
Why outlines are difficult and why they are essential and why everyone goes to script too early.
Review and pitch on Group B Beat Sheets.
Review and pitch on Group A Outlines.
Outline Checklist

ASSIGNMENTS:
Group A Refine outlines. Begin writing First Draft Part 1 – 10+ pages.
Group B: expand beat sheet into outline.

WEEK 6 – OCTOBER 9: BUILDING THE SCRIPT

Review and pitch on Group B outlines.
Review and pitch on Group A scripts.
Discuss story questions and problem solve.

ASSIGNMENTS:
Group A: write Act Two (middle third) of draft.
Group B: Refine outlines. Begin writing First Draft Part 1 – 10+ pages.

WEEK 7 – OCTOBER 16: THE "VOMIT" DRAFT

Evaluating the first draft
Discussion of joke-writing, "alts," various punch-up approaches
When parallel thinking attacks
Workshop/discuss selected scenes or problem areas of Group A and B.

ASSIGNMENTS:
Group A: finish first draft.
Group B: write Act Two of draft.

WEEK 8 – OCTOBER 23: THE "VOMIT" DRAFT, CONTINUED

Workshop selected scenes or problem areas of Group A and B.

ASSIGNMENTS:
Group A: meet with instructor and re-outline based on discussion.
Group B: finish first draft.

WEEK 9 – OCTOBER 30: THE REWRITES BEGIN

Discuss/workshop Group A first drafts/re-outlines and rewriting vs. polishing.
How to approach rewriting, how to kill your darlings
Refining structure
Prioritizing the characters
How to handle rejection and being rewritten.
Discuss Workshop Group B first drafts.

ASSIGNMENTS:
Group A: begin second draft.
Group B: meet with instructor and re-outline based on discussion.

WEEK 10 – NOVEMBER 6: SECOND DRAFT

Discuss/workshop Group B first drafts/re-outlines.
The half-hour production process. The role of the writer-
producer through the production week. Handling network notes.

ASSIGNMENTS:
Group A: continue second draft.
Group B: begin second draft.

WEEK 11 – NOVEMBER 13: SECOND DRAFT CONTINUES

What Stays and What Goes-Pace and Rhythm. Comparison of current series--First Draft to
Final Show Draft. Continue class review of drafts. (Group A)

ASSIGNMENTS:
Group A: finish second draft.
Group B: continue second draft.

WEEK 12 – NOVEMBER 20: PUNCHING

In class punch up/polish of selected Group A and B scenes.
Possible guest speakers, schedule permitting.

ASSIGNMENTS:

Both Groups polish second drafts over Thanksgiving Break.

WEEK 13 – DECEMBER 4: LAST LOOKS

Last room polishes of all scripts.
Discussion of loglines. Pitch loglines for your stories.

ASSIGNMENTS:
Finish Scripts and bring to the final class Dec 11.

WEEK 14 – DEC 11: FINAL THOUGHTS

Practical comedy industry advice
Possible guest speakers, schedule permitting.

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.

AI 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.

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/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