USC School of Cinematic Arts

The John Wells Division of Writing for Screen and Television

CTWR 434
Writing the Half-Hour Comedy Series
Fall 2024 -- Thursdays -- Time: 10 am to 12:50 pm

Units: 2
Location: SCA 363

Instructor: Maggie Bandur
E-mail: bandur@usc.edu
Office hours: By appointment, in person or via Zoom

Course Description

In this course, you will write an episode of an existing half-hour comedy series with emphasis on the anatomy of a joke, comedic structure and character. In the process, students will develop a professional understanding and appreciation of the art and craft of half-hour comedy writing, as well as the specific collaborative process of "the writers' room."

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to write a professional-quality half hour television comedy script, as well as pitch and break stories, pitch jokes in a room and write clear, well-constructed outlines and beat sheets. They will also become effective and respectful collaborators.

Prerequisite: CTWR 321 or CTWR 324 or CTWR 529
Recommended Preparation: CTWR 404

Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required

Students will need access to Final Draft or an equivalent screenwriting program.

You will be expected to be well acquainted with not only the series you choose to write, but the ones your classmates' write as well. This may require access to one or more video streaming services or purchasing seasons of a show.

Required Reading and Supplementary Materials

There are no required textbooks, although books may be recommended during the course of the semester. Handouts, scripts and outlines will be provided as the class progresses.

Description and Assessment of Assignments

Assignments in this course will fall into two categories. One, weekly assignments, including episode analyses, story area pitches and turning in weekly pages will all be ten points each and will be graded on completeness and competency. The more creative assignments including the beat sheet, outline and, most especially, script drafts will be graded on an 100 point scale on their creativity and professional proficiency.

Your script drafts will be assessed for structure, humor and professionalism. Does your script read well and realize the promise of the outline? Are the character voices and tone true to those established by the series? Is the script correctly formatted? Were notes addressed appropriately?

In addition, your scripts and **all your written work** should be proofread, spell-checked and grammatically sound.

Participation

You will be graded on your level of engagement and participation. As this is a workshop, students will be expected to read and critique each other's work to help make it the strongest it can be. We will be reading scenes aloud and discussing everyone's assignments. (If, for any reason, speaking in class is particularly difficult for you, please contact me.) The goal of this course is to replicate the atmosphere of a real writer's room (one of the good ones anyway! We'll talk about the others...) in the sense that it will be supportive and highly collaborative. You are expected to contribute to an environment where people feel safe to share and to both give and accept notes with good grace.

Grading breakdown:

Weekly Assignments: 10%
Participation: 10%
Beat sheet: 10%
Outline: 20%
First Draft: 20%
Final Draft: 30%

Letter Grade & Percentage Range

Course final grades will be determined using the following scale:

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%

Assignment Submission Policy

Assignments will be turned in to a class Google Drive and will be **due Tuesdays by 5 pm.** (If you run into any drive problems, you can also *always* email me directly at bandur@usc.edu.)

Exceptions include the first draft, which will be turned in **AS A HARD COPY** in class, Thursday, October 31 and the final draft, which will be turned in electronically finals week, day and time TBD.

Grading Timeline

In most cases, students will receive feedback the week they turn in their work in class. Should we run out of time before getting to everyone, stragglers will receive written feedback after class. First drafts will be reviewed in a one on one session the week after they are due. Final drafts will receive written feedback.

Students will be apprised of their cumulative grades after outlines are turned in, after first drafts and as requested.

Course Specific Policies

On-time attendance, class participation and handing in of assignments in a timely and complete manner are mandatory for the workshop. In an ever-changing creative landscape, personal professionalism is the one thing a writer can always depend on. There will be a deduction of a half grade step for all work turned in late unless cleared with me before the due date.

You should bring your laptop with you for class, but unless in active use (e.g. taking notes, reading and critiquing work), it should be closed. Absolutely no cell phones are allowed. Please, also bring an analog way to take notes should your classmates abuse their digital privileges.

Often notes will be delivered verbally. It is your responsibility to write down these notes, as is industry standard.

WRITING DIVISION ATTENDANCE POLICY

Students are expected be on time, prepared for each class, and meet professional standards. CTWR 434 only meets once a week and timely attendance is mandatory and failure to attend all class sessions from beginning to end may affect grades. Students are allowed two absences throughout the semester. On the third absence, students will have their final grade lowered by 10% and an additional 10% for each absence thereafter. Two late arrivals equates to one full absence.

NOTE: Exceptions will be made in the case of religious holidays and DSP accommodations.

In the case of medical emergencies, family emergencies, or allowances needed for personal well-being, all concerns must be communicated and approved by the Instructor. If there is a difference of opinion, the student can contact the Writing Division at (213) 740-3303 or writing@cinema.usc.edu

Exemptions to the attendance policy 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.

If a student has an emergency and additional accommodations are needed, those accommodations will need to come through the USC Campus Support and Intervention (CSI) office. The Writing Division recommends the student and/or advocate contact CSI at 213-821-4710 and their home department adviser for additional support.

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

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.

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.

Recording a university class without the express permission of the instructor and announcement to the class, or unless conducted pursuant to an Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) accommodation. Recording can inhibit free discussion in the future, and thus infringe on the academic freedom of other students as well as the instructor. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

Distribution or use of notes, recordings, exams, or other intellectual property, based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study. This includes but is not limited to providing materials for distribution by services publishing course materials. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information, which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relationship to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the internet, or via any other media. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

Course Evaluations

Course evaluation occurs at the end of the semester university wide. It is an important review of students' experience in the class.

Course Schedule

(This schedule is subject to change at any point.)

Week 1 - August 29

Introductions
Review course
Discussion of why do a spec, what makes a good one
Discuss potential series to spec

Assignment: analyze episodes of the two to three chosen series

Week 2 - September 5

Analyze episodes of chosen series
Discuss the importance of character in driving story and humor
Begin discussion of structure
Discuss good pitching technique
Assignment: Story pitches
Be prepared to pitch in class next week

Week 3 - September 12

Pitch story ideas in class
More on story structure and "boarding"

Assignment: Beat Sheet

Week 4 - September 19

Continue to discuss structure, different strategies
Workshop stories

Assignment: Outline

Week 5 - September 26

Outline feedback from professor and peers
Writing jokes (a.k.a. "Can humor be taught?")

Assignment: Write "first act"/first ten pages

Week 6 - October 3

Room terms and culture
Workshop first acts

Assignment: Write "second act"/second ten pages

Week 7 - October 10

Fall Recess

Week 8 - October 17

Workshop second acts

Assignment: Write "third act"/third ten pages

Week 9 - October 24

Workshop third acts

Assignment: Finish first draft, due at the NEXT CLASS as a HARD COPY

Week 10 - October 31

First Drafts are due IN CLASS, as a HARD COPY

Discuss revisions/in class writing exercise

Week 11 - November 7

Individual conferences on first draft

Assignment: Begin revising your script

Week 12 - November 14

"The business"
Table scripts

Assignment: Continue revising your script

Week 13 - November 21

On-set etiquette
Continue tabling scripts

Assignment: Continue revising your script

Week 14 - November 28

Thanksgiving

Week 15 - December 5

Punch up
Continue tabling scripts

Assignment: Continue revising your script

Final Draft Due - Finals Week - Date TBD

The School of Cinematic Arts Support Systems and Statements

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 accommodation is 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

COVID-19 Resource Center - https://coronavirus.usc.edu/what-should-i-do/

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.

Land Acknowledgement

USC acknowledges that we are on the traditional land of the Tongva People. For thousands of years, the Tongva people lived on this land we occupy today and were considered the most powerful indigenous peoples to inhabit the Los Angeles basin. Along with the Tongva, we also recognize the Chumash, Tataviam, Serrano, Cahuilla, Juaneño, and Luiseño People, for the land that USC also occupies around Southern California. To learn about the Indigenous land on which your learning location resides, please visit [Native-Land.ca](#) to discover the Original People of your home.

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