

### *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 [NativeLand.ca](http://NativeLand.ca) to discover the Original People of your home.*

## **School of Cinematic Arts The John Wells Writing Division**

### **WRITING THE HALF HOUR COMEDY SERIES PILOT**

**CTWR 437  
#19229  
Spring 2025**

**Instructor: F.J. Pratt ([fjpratt@usc.edu](mailto:fjpratt@usc.edu))**

**Class schedule: Wednesdays, 4pm – 6:50pm**

**Class Location: SCB 304**

**Office Hours: Whenever you need me... I'm available!**

### **Course Objective**

The course objective is to gain an understanding of and getting experience in, how to write an original comedy pilot. At the end of the semester, the completed, polished script will be 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 for industry.

## Course Reading

Scripts! Scripts! Scripts! There's no better learning tool than reading produced television scripts! I will be uploading many produced scripts to existing shows as a guide on our Google Drive. That said... here are some books on comedy that I do enjoy!

John Vorhaus – The Comic Toolbox

Dan O'Shannon – What Are You Laughing At?

Sigmund Freud-Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious Dick

Gregory--Autobiography

Henri Bergson – Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic Tina Fey –

Bossypants (Best Book Cover ever!)

Marc Maron – Attempting Normal

Andy Goldberg – Improv Comedy

## Grading Criteria

On-time attendance, class participation and handing in assignments in a timely, complete manner are mandatory for the workshop process. In an ever-changing creative landscape, personal professionalism is one thing a writer can always depend on.

10% participation 10% story pitches 20% story outline 15% first act

15% second act

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%

## Software Required

The Script Program: Final Draft. It's the industry standard.

### **Internet Policy**

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

### **Recording Devices**

You may not record lectures or workshops without the consent of the instructor.

### **Laptop and Cell Phone Policy**

The use of personal laptops in class is encouraged. Cruising the Internet and or/texting while we are in session is not permitted. A warning for the first offense will be followed by a lowering of a grade for the second offense.

### **WRITING DIVISION ATTENDANCE POLICY**

Students are expected to be on time, prepared for each class, and meet professional standards.

CTWR 513 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](mailto: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.

***If we ever need to hold a class on Zoom... here's some fun online etiquette known as...***

## **NETIQUETTE**

- Since we are not a big group, you will NOT have to mute your sound.
- If your camera is on, please dress as you would in the classroom, and behave as you would in a professional environment.
- If you have a question during the lecture, use the Chat function. (I will direct my attention to the question and answer it with intellect and humor)
- If you want to ask a question out loud, use the “raise your hand” function on Zoom. A little blue hand will appear so that I know you want to speak.
- Write as if you were speaking in a class discussion: relaxed in tone but respectful, polite and professional in your choice of words.
- Post thoughtful and meaningful responses to questions and answers. The point is to have an ongoing discussion with your writing cohort.

## **Academic Integrity**

The University of Southern California is foremost a learning community committed to foster successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit 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 <https://policy.usc.edu/studenthandbook> 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 <https://policy.usc.edu/studenthandbook/> student handbook or the Office of Academic Integrity's website, <https://academicintegrity.usc.edu/> and university policies on <https://policy.usc.edu/research-and-scholarship-misconduct/> Research and Scholarship Misconduct.

### **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). <https://policy.usc.edu/studenthandbook/>

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: <https://policy.usc.edu/studenthandbook/> The USC Student Handbook, page 13).

### **Course Evaluations**

Course evaluation occurs at the end of the semester, university wide. Please take the time to fill them out. It helps us shape and change the course for future semesters. In addition, a mid-semester evaluation is offered for your choosing.

## **Schedule and Assignments**

### **WEEK 1: Jan 15th - OVERVIEW**

An introduction to me, the course and you.

What have been your influences in comedy?

What are your *feelings* about television comedy?

The value of a spec pilot script. Why you want to be read and what readers look for. Crafting a draft from outline to polished script. Story vs. Character. What is a “voice.” How specific shows tell specific types of stories.

Writing an artful story for an industry with rigid requirements.

The do's and don't of pitching. Why an idea is not a pitch.

*ASSIGNMENT:* Read assigned sit-com script.

Arc the main conflict for the characters and why it works for who they are. Come up with two (2) separate ideas for your spec episode.

### **WEEK 2: Jan 22nd - THE PITCH**

Discuss the main conflict and resolution of the assigned script.

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

Real conflict and why it's so important. Romantic comedies.

Notes – how to give ‘em. How to take ‘em.

In class pitching of spec ideas.

*ASSIGNMENT:* Rewrite and expand the pitch.

### **WEEK 3: Jan 29th - WORKING THE STORY**

How different shows tell different stories.

The ensemble/ workplace comedy.

Continuation of the pitch process. Restructuring stories.

Discuss B and C stories

Introduction of the Beat Sheet.

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

## **WEEK 4: Feb 5th - STORY TIME**

Family comedies and audience identification

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. Adding jokes, dialogue, etc.

Workshop of Beat Sheets

*ASSIGNMENT:* Write outline of your script.

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

## **WEEK 5: Feb 12th - THE OUTLINE**

Outlines due.

Discussion and review of story outlines. Hearing characters' voices and rhythms.

If in doubt, what's the reality?

The beauty and elegance of the bad draft.

*ASSIGNMENT:* Refine and polish outlines.

**WEEK 6: Feb 19th – F.J.'s Joke Writing Seminar!** If you haven't already felt more confident in your ability to write a joke... this class will do the trick.

## **WEEK 7: Feb 26th - "BUCKLE UP, WE START WRITING"**

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

Assign A and B groups.

*ASSIGNMENT:* Write Act 1 of script.

## **WEEK 8: March 5th - CHARACTERS**

Avoiding clichés in story and jokes.

Presentation matters. Format and English.

Class review and reading of Act 1 work (Group A)

*ASSIGNMENT:* Refine Act 1

Begin Act 2



## **WEEK 9: March 12th - BUILDING A RESOLUTION**

Coming up with the *earned* ending. Examples and discussion of why you never forget some shows and instantly forget others. (Hint, it's all about the characters.)  
Class review and reading of Act 1 (Group B)

*ASSIGNMENT*: Refine Act 1. Begin Act 2 (Group B)

***SPRING BREAK: March 16th - 23rd (Rest up!)***

## **WEEK 10: March 26th - WRITING IS REWRITING**

Re-writing in comedy. Heightening motivation.  
Adding obstacles to the protagonist's want. Punching up jokes. Continue review of drafts. (Group A)

*ASSIGNMENT*: Complete Second draft of episode (Group A)

## **WEEK 11: April 2nd - WHAT STAYS. WHAT GOES**

Pace, rhythm and tone.  
Compare current series first drafts to the AS BROADCAST draft. Continue class review of second drafts.

*ASSIGNMENT*: Complete second draft of episode (Group B)

## **WEEK 12: April 9th - THE ROOM**

The rules (they're more like guidelines) of the writer's room. Written and unwritten.

Room re-writing on second drafts.

*ASSIGNMENT*: Polish Second Draft (Both Groups)

## **WEEK 13: April 16th – A VOICE OTHER THAN MINE!**

Guest Speaker, Jessica Kaminsky (EP/Showrunner, “*Pretty Freakin’ Scary*”) will fill your head and heart with wonderful sage advice about the brass tacks of being a TV writer.

## **WEEK 14: April 23rd – How to pitch a pilot idea to Executives... In less than 15 minutes!**

It can be done! You don't want to overstay your welcome, nor do you want to

drone on and on. You will learn to be concise, funny, but more importantly... to the point!

## **WEEK 15: April 30th - FINALS WEEK – THE BUSINESS PART**

Outlets for getting read and being seen.

Finding an agent or manager.

Freelance script assignments.

Getting on a show and working your way up.

The writing staff, jobs, titles, responsibilities.

*FINAL ASSIGNMENT DUE*: Turn in completed script.

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

### **The School of Cinematic Arts Support Systems and Statements**

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 persons 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](mailto:diversity@cinema.usc.edu)

[diversity@cinema.usc.edu](mailto:diversity@cinema.usc.edu) or anonymously submit a report on SCA Community:

<https://scacommunity.usc.edu> <https://scacommunity.usc.edu/secure/diversityEquity/> You

can also read more about how to report discrimination based on a protected class here:

<https://eeotix.usc.edu/get-help/what-are-my-choices-text>

### **SCA Office of Student Services**

213-740-8358 or [StudentAffairs@cinema.usc.edu](mailto:StudentAffairs@cinema.usc.edu)

### **SCA Embedded Therapists**

Students enrolled in an SCA major program can schedule an appointment with an embedded therapist for the School of Cinematic Arts through the student health portal

<https://usc.edu/myshr>

## **SCA Community**

For additional SCA resources please visit <http://scacommunity.usc.edu/>

## **Creative Technology and Support**

(213) 821-4571 [creativetech@cinema.usc.edu](mailto:creativetech@cinema.usc.edu)

Location: SCA 128

Support Hours: Monday - Friday, 8:30 AM - 8:30 PM

<https://knowledgebase.sca.usc.edu/>

<https://workstations.sca.usc.edu/>

## **Physical Production Office**

The Physical Production Office assists students and faculty with production-related matters including production numbers, locations, permits, insurance, gear and equipment vendors, safety issues, and crew and actor policies. More information can be found by visiting the online Production Procedures and Safety

Handbook. <https://sites.google.com/usc.edu/sca-safety-handbook/home> The Physical Production Office is located at SCA 304 and is open every weekday from 9am-5pm (Fridays 9am-1pm). You can also reach the Office by calling 213-740-1298 or by email at: [ir@cinema.usc.edu](mailto:ir@cinema.usc.edu).

## **Office of Industry Relations**

School of Cinematic Arts - SCA 235 (213) 740-4432 [ir@cinema.usc.edu](mailto:ir@cinema.usc.edu) Cinematic Arts Library Research Guide: [ir@cinema.usc.edu](mailto:ir@cinema.usc.edu)

## **Cinematic Arts Library Research Guide**

<https://libguides.usc.edu/cinema>

## **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 <https://policy.usc.edu/studenthandbook/> or the Office of Academic Integrity's website, <http://academicintegrity.usc.edu/> and university policies on Research and Scholarship Misconduct. <https://policy.usc.edu/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 <https://osas.usc.edu/> (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 <http://osas.usc.edu/> You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at [osasfrontdesk@usc.edu](mailto: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.

<http://sites.google.com/usc.edu/counseling-mental-health>

**988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline** - 988 for both calls and text messages –

<http://sites.google.com/usc.edu/counseling-mental-health> 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) – <http://sites.google.com/usc.edu/rsvpclientservices/home> 24/7 on call free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and powerbased harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking)

**Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX (EEO-TIX)** - (213) 740-5086

<http://eeotix.usc.edu/> 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

[http://usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care\\_report](http://usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report) 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

<http://osas.usc.edu/> 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

<http://campussupport.usc.edu/> 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** <http://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** – <https://dps.usc.edu/> 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.

**SafetyUSC Department of Public** - <https://dps.usc.edu/> 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) <http://ombuds.usc.edu/> 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** - <http://chan.usc.edu/patient-care/faculty-practice> (323) 442-2850 or [otfp@med.usc.edu](mailto: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

**And lastly... F.J.'s pet peeves!**

**Promptness.** I expect everyone to be in class on time! Our time together is limited... I want to torture you for the most time I can!

**Grammar & Punctuation.** We live in a world of spell check, so no excuses. If I see excessive grammatical screw-ups, it will affect the grade of your project. (*You can thank the nuns of Our Lady of Mercy who cursed me with this obsession!*)

**Format.** I expect you to be well versed in Final Draft. It's the industry standard for script programs. ALL SCRIPTS must be formatted correctly and in the FDX template. This will allow all of us to type in notes into your document.

All assigned work must be uploaded to our Google Drive... **NO LATER THAN MONDAY AT 12PM.** This will give us enough time to read everyone's work and be ready to discuss at class on Wednesday. AGAIN... your participation is everything.

Now, the best for last... drumroll please... **RESPECT** for your fellow students. This creative world we live in can be rough on our psyche. There are no dumb pitches or questions. If there were, I'd be on Mt. Rushmore of comedy writers!

**PLEASE NOTE:**

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