

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 to discover the Original People of your home.

School of Cinematic Arts The John Wells Division of Writing for the Screen and Television

WRITING THE HALF HOUR COMEDY SERIES PILOT CTWR 537 Section #19344D Spring 2025

Instructor: Rob Turbovsky (turbovsk@usc.edu)

Class schedule: Wednesdays, 7pm – 10pm

Class Location: SCA 361

Office Hours: By appointment

Course Objective

The course objective is to gain an understanding of the half-hour television comedy pilot through the writing of an original pilot script for a series. Essential components of success in this endeavor include a willingness to revise your work and a strong grasp of character, conflict, and causation. At the end of the semester, the completed, polished script and accompanying series bible 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 that demonstrates the style and narrative potential of a half hour series.

Course Reading

I will assign pilot scripts for discussion and analysis, as well as occasional documents/excerpts/handouts to shape and supplement our work.

Grading Criteria

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. Non-script written assignments can be written in Final Draft or Word. Scripts will be evaluated based on their structure, format, and the writer's engagement with the revisions process. As in the professional world, typos and grammatical/formatting errors will be noted and will affect your grade if they are excessive and remain uncorrected.

All written assignments unless otherwise specified are due by 12pm on the Monday before class and should be emailed to everyone in the group. It is my assumption that we all have busy lives – it is unlikely that your work will be read closely enough to be thoughtfully critiqued in class if you miss this deadline.

10% participation
10% story pitches
20% story outline
15% first act
15% second act
30% final draft / series bible
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

A NOTE ABOUT THIS WORKSHOP:

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.

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.

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

Please do not record lectures or use any electronic devices during class without prior consent. Research has shown “the mere presence of a smartphone¹” can be distracting. Computers may be used for note-taking/script reading purposes only.

Schedule and Assignments

WEEK 1: Jan 15th - OVERVIEW

An introduction to me, the course and you.

What have been your influences in 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.

What is a “voice.” How specific shows tell specific types of stories.

The Comic Perspective/Premise – high concept and low concept

Writing an artful story for an industry with rigid requirements.

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

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

ASSIGNMENT:

1. Read George Saunders essay on worry: <https://georgesaunders.substack.com/p/on-worry>
2. Read assigned sitcom script and be prepared to discuss the characters’ comic perspectives, the main conflict, and why it’s an appropriate match for these specific characters
3. Prepare three (3) separate ideas for your pilot to be pitched orally in class.

WEEK 2: Jan 22nd - THE PITCH

Discuss the main conflict and resolution of the assigned script.

The Comic Character. How a story explains a character. Why the best stories are all about character and not about plot or “ideas.”

Real conflict and why it's so important.

“The Story Engine”

Types of sitcoms, tones, and types of comic stories.

Winning the audience’s trust

In class pitching of spec pilot ideas.

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Choose your pilot idea and write paragraph-length biographies of your main characters and a very brief/general pilot story (2 pages max total).
2. Read second assigned pilot. Write a very brief summary of the plot, noting the characters’ motivations and their actions, across the various stories.

WEEK 3: Jan 29th - WORKING THE SERIES

Focusing the characters/ review of biographies assignment

¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-023-36256-4>

Discuss B and C stories and their use.

Introduction of the Beat Sheet and story structure – from old stability to new stability.

Assign A and B groups for weekly presentations.

ASSIGNMENT: Both groups prepare beat sheets of your story. (Example provided)

WEEK 4: Feb 5th - STORY TIME

Following the story to a clear, satisfying ending that sets up your series.

Pitch B and C stories.

Workshop of Beat Sheets—Group A

ASSIGNMENT: Group A will prepare an Outline of their story (due Feb 17)

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

WEEK 5: Feb 12th - THE OUTLINE

Workshop of Beat Sheets—Group B

Hearing characters' voices and rhythms. The cleverness trap.

If in doubt, what's the reality?

How to read an outline – problems and opportunities

ASSIGNMENT: Group B will prepare an outline of their story (due Feb 24)

WEEK 6: Feb 19th – The OUTLINE Part 2

Room work on Group A outlines.

ASSIGNMENT: Group A revise outlines, discuss with instructor, begin Act One (due March 3)

WEEK 7: Feb 26th – THE WRITING BEGINS, ROUGHLY

The vomit draft / the 90% rule

Avoiding clichés in story and jokes -- what has the ring of truth?

Room Work on Group B outlines.

ASSIGNMENT: Group A writes Act 1 (due March 3)

Group B revise outline, discuss with instructor, begin Act One (due March 17)

WEEK 8: March 5th - BUILDING A DRAFT

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 A)

ASSIGNMENT: Group A begins work on Acts 2 and 3 of draft (due March 24)

Group B writes Act 1 (due March 17)

March 9th to March 15th—SPRING BREAK

WEEK 9: March 19th -A FIRST DRAFT IS A FIRST DRAFT

Class Review and reading of Act 1 (Group B)

Heightening motivation and stakes – the price of failure and the prize of success

Macro and micro conflicts

Adding obstacles to the protagonist's want. Punching up jokes.

ASSIGNMENT: Group A will finish first draft (due March 24)

Group B will begin work on Acts 2 and 3 of draft (due March 31)

WEEK 10: March 26th – WRITING IS RE-WRITING

Building a re-write plan. // The upside of rewriting and the “last great idea”

Compare current series first drafts to the AS BROADCAST draft.

Class Review and reading of First Drafts (Group A)

ASSIGNMENT: Group A begins re-write of pilot script (due April 7)

Group B finishes work on first draft (due March 31)

WEEK 11: April 2nd – WRITING IS RE-WRITING PART 2

Class review and reading of First Drafts (Group B)

ASSIGNMENT: Group A re-writing continues (draft due April 7)

Group B re-writing begins (draft due April 14)

WEEK 12: April 9th –THE LONG ARC

Class review and reading of Second Draft, polish of selected scenes. (Group A)

Breaking down a season

Preparing a series bible/story document (model provided)

ASSIGNMENT: Create a draft series bible/pitch document.

(Group A bible due April 21, Group B bible due April 28)

WEEK 13: April 16th – THE LONG ARC Part 2

Class review and reading of Second draft (Group B), polish of selected scenes.

WEEK 14-- April 23rd— AN ENCOURAGING VISIT!

We will review Group A bibles and be joined by professional comedy writers who will offer wisdom, we hope.

(Guests TBD)

ASSIGNMENT: Continue revisions, prepare a pilot pitch intro (example provided)

WEEK 15:– April 30th EVERYTHING ELSE

A review of Group B bibles and a brief workshop on selling/pitching a pilot and a roundup of any and all lingering questions about writers rooms, idea development, and this business of show, as it stands in 2025, with more possible guests.

FINAL ASSIGNMENT DUE: Turn in completed script and revised bible/pitch intro by 5pm on May 7th.

(Please note – dates, guests, 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.

WRITING DIVISION ATTENDANCE POLICY

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

CTWR 537 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 equate 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.

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.

Statement for Students with Disabilities

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure that the letter is delivered to the Professor as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open from 8:30 am to 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776

Statement on Academic Integrity

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty included the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. SCAMPUS, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 1.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/>. Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/>.

Emergency Preparedness/Course Continuity in a Crisis

In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies.

Please activate your course in Blackboard with access to the course syllabus. Whether or not you use Blackboard regularly, these preparations will be crucial in an emergency. USC's Blackboard learning management system and support information is available at blackboard.usc.edu.

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