

INTRODUCTION TO TELEVISION WRITING – AUTUMN 2013

DC 272 / Section 401

Wednesday 1:30 – 4:45

CDM 200

Instructor: Christopher Parrish

Office Hours: 10:00 am – 11:30 am

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The primary objective of this course is for students to learn how to write for network and cable television, focusing on fiction and non-fiction TV programs, including news, talk, documentaries, dramas and comedies. The course will assist students in improving their writing skills as well as helping them understand the basic approaches and techniques in writing for television. PREREQUISITES: DC 201

To be specific, there are two main parts to this course – A.) learning the overall structure, format, style and tone of various television genres, with an emphasis on situation comedies and one hour dramas and B.) **Completing an individual spec episode of an existing primetime situation comedy or one hour drama**, including the complete first draft of a teleplay, an outline and a “beat sheet.” Writing for broadcast news, talk shows and documentaries will be briefly covered if time allows and student interest warrants it. But they won’t be graded on it.

The instructor will guide students on how to strike the delicate balance between writing an episode that embodies the characters, structure, tone, and dialogue of an existing show while expressing the student’s own creative voice, point of view and style.

The class will survey programs and scripts of various genres, including animation, sketch comedy and “reality.” They will verbally pitch episode ideas to their peers and instructor of their chosen first run primetime television series. Like professional screenwriters working on an actual series, student writers will go through the entire process within our mock Writer’s Room and taking turns as the designated “Showrunner.” As the course progresses, students will engage in their own “punch-up” sessions.

Over the course, each student will have their teleplay or ‘script’ read aloud in class by “casting” their classmates in the roles for a “Table Reading.” Constructive criticism and active participation is mandatory, as is assigned homework.

Students will also have the opportunity for a classroom Q&A (via Skype) with Hollywood professionals who have written for and/or been involved with primetime network sitcoms and/or hour-long dramas.

REQUIREMENTS:

No writer improves without receiving feedback on his or her work. You and your classmates will engage in an unofficial and mutually beneficial contract with one another by reading each other's work and giving respectful and constructive criticism.

Should it become apparent that students are not living up to their end of the contract, **the Professor reserves the right to collect WRITTEN NOTES from every in-class student on every submitted writing assignment of their peers'**. So let's avoid such a drastic measure by doing the reading and coming to class prepped to speak your mind. Class participation is 20% of your grade.

DEADLINES:

Just as if you have been hired to write on assignment for a television series, **MEETING YOUR DEADLINE IS ABSOLUTELY VITAL**. Without a valid medical excuse or legitimate family emergency, assignments must be turned in on time or no points will be awarded for your work. (And, no, your cat going to that great litter box in the sky doesn't qualify as a legitimate excuse.)

ASSIGNMENTS:

All written assignments (scripts, treatments, outlines, beat sheets, etc.) must be typed in 12 pt. Courier font. Scripts must also be free of spelling, grammatical and punctuation errors, unless the dialogue or storyline otherwise calls for it. All scripts and scenes are to be done in proper screenwriting format. Most professionals use Final Draft or Movie Magic. Before purchasing either software, inquire with your seller about student discounts. **Please make certain all assignments include your name, the course title and number and the date of the assignment due.**

EMAILS:

Please sign your first and last name with every email you send. I check my email every day before 10am and will have a response for you within 24 hours. **My email is cparris6@cdm.depaul.edu**

THE NO, ZILCH AND ABSOLUTE ZERO TOLORANCE POLICY ABOUT NEGATIVE CRITICISM:

When new and aspiring writers share their work with others, it can be an emotionally charged situation leaving the writer feeling very vulnerable. Throughout your screenwriting careers, you will inevitably receive catty, insulting, idiotic and nonproductive criticism of your work. However, in our classroom, absolutely none of it will be tolerated. If and when there is something you dislike about a classmate's writing (and you will), it is your obligation to express it. But more importantly, it is your responsibility to express why it is you think so

respectfully, and ideally, suggest a way to fix it. At the same time, the person receiving constructive criticism from their peers will do so in a polite, non-defensive and professional manner.

GRADE BREAKDOWN:

Produced Episode Beat Sheet: 10%

Story Pitches: 10%

Original Episode Beat Sheet: 10%

Story Outline: 20% (Midterm)

Completed Script: 25% (Final)

Class Participation: 20%

COURSE CALENDAR:

Class 1 - September 11th: Greetings, Syllabus & Structure

Welcome to the Writers' Room. Class introductions.

Who are you and what do you want out of the course?

What's your writing history - your scripts, stories, etc.? What's mine?

What shows are Must See/Binge Viewing/Top DVR Priority for you?

What show(s) do you absolutely hate? Why?

What currently running show would you like to take a crack at?

The syllabus. What have you gotten yourself in to? What are we doing and why?

A very brief rundown on how TV shows are written, produced and staffed. Why you need to write a TV spec to break into the business.

What shows to avoid when writing for a spec script. What shows to consider.

What is the shelf life of your spec script in Hollywood?

Breaking it all down: TV EPISODE DISSECTIONS

What are the beats?

Structure. How many acts in a sitcom and a drama?

Is there an average number of scenes?

Act breaks. When do they come?

What about an animation script?

How long should my script be?

How long should my scenes be?

Storylines and running gags.

For your viewing and deconstructing pleasure:

My Name is Earl: "Joy's Wedding" Written by Greg Garcia.

Freaks & Geeks: "Beers & Weirs" Written by J. Elvis Weinstein & Judd Apatow

(**Episodes are subject to change**)

HOMEWORK: Begin browsing for the television show you want to write. This is just a vetting process. You do not yet have to commit to that series yet. Watch a minimum of three produced episodes of the series of your choice (ideally, including the pilot and the most current episode.) With each of the episodes, create a produced episode beat sheet (double-spaced, 2 pages max.)

IN CLASS DEADLINE: 12:30pm on Wednesday, September 18th

Email all beat sheets to me at **cparris6@cdm.depaul.edu**, including the title of the series and episode titles. Bring your beat sheets to class and be prepared to discuss the series you watched, your beat sheets and be prepared to present it on the dry erase board (time permitting.)

ONLINE STUDENTS DEADLINE: Email your three produced episode beat sheets to me by 4:45 PM C.S.T. on Wednesday, September 18th.

All assignments should include a cover page with your full name, the full title of the course and course #, your instructor's name and the due date of the assignment.

Class 2 – September 18th: Series Types, Themes & Settings

A brief history of the sitcom and one-hour drama.
What were the first?
How have they evolved?

Let's examine popular television show types that stand the test of time.

Popular Sitcom Types

Family Comedies
Workplace Comedies
Romantic Comedies
High-Concept / Science Fiction Comedies
Star Vehicles
Spin-Offs

What show titles fall in to these types?

Popular Drama Types

Police Procedural/ Private Detective
Courtroom
Medical
Science Fiction/Fantasy
Slice of Life

Antihero/Life of Crime
Nighttime Soap
Adventure

Name some others?

What types of shows are virtually extinct (Hint: one involves a horse and the other rhymes with “manthology.” What has remained the same.
What is a genre? What is a sub-genre?

What is the type of the show you want to write?

POPULAR SITCOM THEMES

Parenthood
Buddies / Gal Pals
Opposites Attract
Culture Clash
Looking for Love in the Big City

POPULAR DRAMA THEMES

High School
Organized Crime
Buddy Cops
Prison Life
Politics
Spying /Anti-Terrorism
Showbusiness/Price of Fame
The Supernatural

What are some others?

What is your show’s theme or themes?

POPULAR SHOWS SETTINGS/LOCATIONS

Middle Class Household
Bar/Restaurant
Courtroom
Law Firm
Police Department
Hospital
Detective Agency
High School/College
Small Town America

Mean Metropolitan Streets
Spaceship
The Suburbs
White Collar Office
Mansion/Penthouse/Castle
War Zone
Radio/TV Station

What popular shows fit into these settings? What are some other settings not mentioned? Examples.

Why do some many shows take place within these environments? Are these good places to find conflict? If so, what are bad locations to look for conflict?

Is there an average number of sets for a show?
What's a swingset? (Hint: You don't actually swing on it?)
Why do animated series often stick to the same sets, too?

From The Goldbergs to The Goldbergs -or- The next wave of Hawaii 5-0
The more things change, the more they stay the same.

For your viewing pleasure. Comparing and contrasting series.

SITCOM: *The Goldbergs* (1949). *The Goldbergs* (2013).

What are some tired and cliché plots shows frequently explore?

CLASS EXERCISE #1: IT'S TIME TO PLAY, "NAME THAT DVR PLOT." Class divides into groups. Instructor reads random episode plots of hour-long dramas and sitcoms. Groups attempt to beat the clock by guessing the correct series titles.

For your viewing pleasure. Comparing and contrasting series.

DRAMA: *Dragnet* (1967). *L.A. Dragnet* (2003) - HULU

CLASS EXERCISE #2:

Going around the room, in 30 words or less, tell us the plot of a possible episode you might like to write. Don't worry. This is brainstorming. It's supposed to be rough.

HOMEWORK: Learn your show inside and out. Binge view as much as possible. Search TV.com, IMDB.com and Netflix for synopsis of all past episodes. Read scripts (posted online by the instructor, if available, of the show you want to do.) Come up with five separate episode plot pitches for the series you wish to write. If you're still on the fence with choosing a show, you can do different plot pitches for more than one show. However, it must be five plot pitches in total. Write up each pitch. Thirty words or less per plot pitch. And be prepared to pitch them aloud to the class.

Please keep in mind that this is a brainstorming exercise. They don't have to be perfectly polished.

ONLINE STUDENTS' HOMEWORK: Email your pitches by 1:00 pm C.S.T. on Wednesday, September 25th. We will read aloud your plot pitches in class and class will give feedback.

Class 3 – September 25th: Tone, Character & Plot Pitches

*****TODAY IS THE DEADLINE TO DECIDE ON YOUR TELEVISION SERIES*****

CLASS ACTIVITY/ASSIGNMENT: AND HERE'S THE PITCH!

Students pitch their five plot pitches to the class. The class will deliver immediate feedback.

TONE

The tone of a series sets the mood and should immediately give the audience/reader of idea of what to expect or not expect. Tone is a show's flavor. Some are sweet (Sam & Cat, Touched by an Angel, Full House.) Some are spicy (Swingtown, Sex & the City.)

How would you describe your show's tone or tones?

POPULAR TONES IN SITCOMS

Quirky (Arrested Development, The Office)
Goofy (Married with Children, Reno-911) slapstick
Irreverent (Veep, Curb Your Enthusiasm) – no sacred cow is safe-
Raunchy (Eastbound & Down)
Witty (Frasier)
Satirical (South Park)
Family Friendly (The Middle)
Romantic (Dharma & Greg, Mike & Molly)

Other examples?

POPULAR TONES IN DRAMAS

Gritty (Deadwood)
Intense (24, Breaking Bad)
Eerie (Lost, Carnivale, American Horror Story)
Warm-Spirited (Parenthood, Thirtysomething, Ed)
Cynical (Boardwalk Empire, The Sopranos)

Lavish (Game of Thrones, Spartacus)
Sincere (Touched by an Angel, Highway to Heaven)
Tense (CSI, Law & Order) –won't rest til we get this done-
Cerebral (The Newsroom, The West Wing)

For your viewing pleasure: Similar themes, different tones

The West Wing & Veep

E/R & Scrubs

(Episodes are subject to change)

What are the differences and similarities? How does the tone manifest itself?

CHARACTER

POPULAR CHARACTER PERSONALITIES

Antihero
Alphadog
Underdog
Bad Boy
The Slob
Voice of Reason
Tormented Soul
Hopeless Romantic
Crusader
The Grump
Boy Next Door/Girl Next Door
Career Woman
Nemesis
Nerd/Geek
Business Titan
Dutiful One
Loose Cannon
Psycho
Weasel

What popular characters fall into these character types?

Other types?

Who are the main characters of your chosen series?

How would you describe them? Loves? Hates? Friends? Enemies? Greatest dream? Worst fear?

How would you describe their relationships with one another?

How have they changed over the duration of the series? If so, how?

EMBRACE CHARACTERS' FLAWS & VULNERABILITIES

In comedy and drama, the most flawed characters frequently deliver the best conflict. Even on procedural shows like *Law & Order* and *CSI*, when the stakes get personal and the characters reveal their personal demons, the stories always tend to deliver more of an emotional impact.

HOMEWORK: Compose a beat sheet for your own original episode script, based on the television series of your choosing. As before, your beat sheet should not exceed two pages, double-spaced. Email them to me by Saturday, September 28th 8:00 PM C.S.T. You will receive your fellow students' beat sheets via email. **READ ALL OF THEM** and be prepared to discuss them in class.

ONLINE CLASSMATES' HOMEWORK: Read your classmates' beat sheets and provide polite feedback with constructive criticism. CC the instructor your comments, too. Due before the beginning of Class 4.

Class 4 – October 2nd: BEAT SHEETS, FORMATS, DIALOGUE & OUTLINES

CLASS WORKSHOPPING: BEAT SHEETS

A review and open critique of submitted beat sheets. Discuss what elements are strong, what could be stronger. Possible suggestions of storylines and character motivations.

Do the stories track with the established characters and tone?

Is there greater potential for conflict?

For dramas, is there tension and are the stakes the best they can be?

Regarding sitcoms, can you top the existing comedy?

Are the various storylines tracking?

Is your new episode too similar to one that has already been produced? If so, it's not of much use to you as a writing sample to potential agents, managers, producers or television executives.

FORMATTING TELEPLAYS

The instructor will show various script samples of network sitcoms and dramas, making note of act breaks, scene length, scene numbers, action, how characters are introduced, scene headings, etc.

DIALOGUE

For most television shows, dialogue is everything. It is what establishes and differentiates a character. It is what expresses exposition. And in sitcoms, it is what most often delivers the jokes. Your spec script lives or dies by your ability to

convincingly mimic how the established characters speak, behave, interact with one another and see the world around them.

Following is a list of other things to keep in mind when writing dialogue of any character.

- Attitude
- Mood
- Accent
- Slang
- Poor or eloquent use of language
- Profanity or lack of it
- Catchphrases
- How they argue
- Verbal diarrhea
- How quickly or slowly they speak
- Verbal pauses
- Speed in which they speak

COMEDIC DIALOGUE STYLES:

- Brutal truth and putdowns
- Flip flopping
- The contradiction
- Disproportionate responses
- Volume

METHODS OF DIALOGUE PUNCH UP:

- Table reads (we do them in class)
- Condensing (less is always more)
- End on the punchline or dramatic punch
- Reality check (is it true to that universe and character)

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: GETTING INTO CHARACTER

Each student will pick a character from their chosen show, come up to the front of the class and, as that character, pretend to leave a brief, annoyed voicemail or written message to someone else on the show who has angered them. Bad impressions are welcome. No impressions are fine, too. It's all about capturing the characters' voices.

OUTLINES

Instructor will provide samples of outlines used in television episodes.

HOMEWORK: STORY OUTLINES - YOUR OUTLINE IS YOUR MIDTERM!

Using your beat sheet (and the notes you've received on your beat sheet), students will expand their episodes into detailed story outlines. Scenes should typically be at

least a paragraph each. Unless specifically important, give the broad strokes of your dialogue. **Outlines should be 5 to 7 pages, single spaced, 12 point Courier font.** Outlines are to be emailed to instructor by Saturday, October 5th at 8:00pm, C.S.T.

You will receive an email with your classmates' outlines. READ THEM ALL and be prepared to discuss them in the next class.

ONLINE STUDENTS: Read your classmates outlines and provide feedback, cc-ing instructor before Class 5.

OPTIONAL OUT OF CLASS EXERCISE: By now, you've watched several episodes of the series you've chosen. Tonight, play another episode. But this time, CLOSE YOUR EYES FOR THE ENTIRE EPISODE AND ONLY LISTEN TO IT. Did you do it already? Did you notice how the show is much more dialogue than action? Did you notice the pauses your characters take?

Class 5 – October 9th: Again, with the outlines?

Class discussion and feedback on outlines.

Discussion of the benefits of rewrites and effective rewriting tools.

Rewrite questions:

Can I beat that joke?

How do we up the stakes?

Can I start the scene later and/or leave the scene earlier?

Are the characters' personalities standing out?

Is there something specific I can show in dialogue or action to convey "I really get this guy or girl?"

As a writer, can I find more opportunities to infuse my voice and point of view without clashing with the tone of the show?

Can I have less incidental characters?

Can I condense scenes?

Midterm grades handed out.

HOMEWORK: Second Draft of your Outline. Utilizing feedback from your class and instructor, do a second draft of your outline. Please Note: Failure to implement changes of a second draft because you believe there is nothing wrong with the first one is failure in this assignment. Even if you are just fine with your first draft, you need to embrace pulling your story apart and seeing how it might work otherwise. And after this course is over, if you end up coming back to what your original vision was, that's fine. But you have to see it from different angles. That's the point.

Second Draft Outlines are Due on Saturday, October 12th by 8:00pm C.S.T. and must be emailed to me by that time.

You will receive an email with your classmates' Second Draft Outlines. READ THEM ALL and be ready to discuss them during the next class.

ONLINE STUDENTS' HOMEWORK: Read your classmates' Second Draft Outlines and provide feedback via email. As usual, cc your comments to me before Class 6 commences.

Class 6 – October 16th: LIVE FROM THE WORLD OF SITCOMS: IT'S THE SKYPE MYSTERY GUEST!!!

Guest to be determined. Our Skype guest will be a professional working in network television sitcoms (Possible Screenwriter, Producer, Director, Television Executive, Agent, Manager or Actor.) Instructor will interview Guest followed by Student Q&A.

Discussion of notes received by students on revised outlines. What have you changed? What's has stayed the same? Why?

CLASS WORKSHOP: THIS SCENE SUCKS – THE REWRITE

Class will break into smaller groups and work together in their own "Writer's Room" with an appointed "Showrunner" and rewrite a truly horrible scene the instructor has cooked up based on a popular television series. Scenes will be from both sitcoms and dramas. At the end of class, students will present their rewritten scene to the class with a "Table Reading."

HOMEWORK: Time to start writing your script! Email Page 1–10 from all students (including your title page) to me by 1:00 PM C.S.T. on Wednesday, October 23rd.

ONLINE STUDENTS: Read your classmates' Pages 1-10 and provide feedback via email. CC your notes to me, before Class 7 commences.

Class 7 – October 23rd: LIVE FROM THE WORLD OF PRIMETIME DRAMA: IT'S THE SKYPE MYSTERY GUEST – PART 2!!!

Guest to be determined. Our Skype guest will be a professional working in network television dramas (Possible Screenwriter, Producer, Director, Television Executive, Agent, Manager or Actor.) Instructor will interview Guest followed by Student Q&A.

TABLE READ: Class will split off into Comedy and Drama groups, if instructor deems necessary. Students assign speaking roles to classmates and take turns reading one another's first ten pages aloud, including description. Afterward, classmates will give critiques. Instructor will float around the room monitoring table reads.

ONLINE STUDENTS: Read students' first ten pages and email notes. CC instructor your notes before Class 8 commences.

HOMEWORK: Pages 11 – 20 from all students. Email pages to instructor by 1:00 pm C.S.T. on Wednesday, October 30th.

Class 8 – October 30th: TABLE READ

Read Pages 11 – 20 aloud in your groups. Change up the groups for fresh eyes and new opinions of your work. Table Read online classmates' work.

ONLINE STUDENTS: WATCH LECTURE and take notes given by your class. Email notes to classmates and cc notes you're giving to instructor.

HOMEWORK: Write pages 20 – 30 and email to instructor by 1:00 PM C.S.T. on Wednesday, November 6th.

Class 9 – November 6th: Table Read Trouble Shooting

Bring in scenes giving you the most trouble. Classmates will table and discuss. Utilize punchup and rewrite methods introduced earlier in the course.

HOMEWORK:

(DRAMA WRITERS): Email pages 30 – 40 to Instructor.

(SITCOM WRITERS): Email pages 30 – 40 to Instructor. If script runs less than 40 pages, send all pages from 30 up to the end, along with your most recently rewritten scene(s) to fulfill 10 page homework assignment quota. Assignments must be submitted by 1:00 PM C.S.T. on Wednesday, November 13th.

Class 10 – November 13th: FINAL TABLE READ

Groups conduct a final Table Read .

FINAL EXAM: YOUR COMPLETED SPEC TELEVISION SCRIPT

Partial grading of your Final Exam will reflect how well you incorporate the notes and feedback from your instructor and peers into the completed script. Please note the feedback you receive may very well alter the script you've laid out. So prepare to roll with the changes. That's a big part of what it is to be a working television writer.

Your completed script/final exam must be emailed to me at cparris6@cdm.depaul.edu by 5:00 PM, C.S.T. on Wednesday, November 20th. No extensions. No exceptions.

DEPAUL UNIVERSITY POLICIES:

Online Instructor Evaluation

Evaluations allow students to provide feedback of their instructors and the courses they teach. Detailed feedback enables the instructor to revise, update and tailor their teaching tools, methods and course material to meet a course's learning goals and the students' academic needs. Evaluations are required of you and considered a key resource to provide students with the highest quality of teaching possible.

These evaluations are strictly anonymous. Neither the instructor nor the administration track who entered what responses. Although software automatically determines if a student has completed the evaluations, they always remain separate from the student's identity. Participation by all students is the university's goal. To insure this as best as possible, periodic reminders will be sent to students until their evaluations are completed. Students complete evaluations online at

<https://mycti.cti.depaul.edu/mycti>

Email

Email is the primary means of communication between faculty and students enrolled in this course outside of class time. Please make certain your email listed under "demographic information" at CampusConnect is correct.

Academic Integrity Policy

This course will be subject to the academic integrity policy passed by the faculty. More information can be found at <http://academicintegrity.depaul.edu/>

Plagiarism

Even though Hollywood is plagued with remakes upon remakes (*Hawaii Five-0*, *Dallas*, *Parenthood*, *90210*) passing somebody else's script off as your own won't fly. To play it safe, research the story synopsis of every episode from the show you have chosen.

Students enrolled in this course should be advised of the heavy sanctions DePaul University places on anyone found guilty of plagiarism. If proven, a plagiarism charge can very likely result in an automatic failure of the course and possible expulsion from the university. Work submitted by a student and written by someone else will result in the most serious sanctions.

Please contact your instructor if you if you aren't clear about what plagiarism is or how to acknowledge your source materials in an acceptable manner. For example, having your characters sing lyrics to a popular song in your script is not plagiarism. Submitting a *Seinfeld* spec script where Jerry visits a bratty boy, who lives in a plastic bubble is.

Incomplete

An incompleted grade is granted only in exceptionally dire circumstances, ie. the death of an immediate family member, a serious illness, etc. Any such reason must be documented and submitted before an incomplete can be issued. An incomplete request has to be made a minimum two weeks prior to the final exam deadline. It must also be approved by the Dean of the College of Computing and Digital Media. Negative consequences resulting in a poor grade for the course does not constitute a legitimate request for an incomplete.

Resources for Students with Disabilities

If you feel you may require an accommodation, based on the impact of a disability, please contact me private to discuss your specific needs. Any private discussion will remain strictly confidential. To ensure you receive the most possible and appropriate accommodations possible, based on your needs, please contact me as quickly as possible (ideally within the first week of class.) Also, if you have (LD, AD/HD, etc.) please make sure you contact the Plus Program. For all other disabilities, please contact The Offices for Students with Disabilities at: Student Center, LPC, Suite #370 – PH: (773)325-1677 FAX: (773)325-3720 TTY: (773)325-7296