

WRITING THE EPISODIC DRAMA – SPRING 2015

DC 307 901, 910

Wednesdays, 5:45pm to 9:00pm

Lewis Center Room 1516

Instructor: Nathan DeWitt, MFA

Office Hours: Tuesdays: 8:45am to 9:30am, Wednesdays: 3:00pm to 5:45pm, Thursdays: 11:30am to 1:30pm, Fridays 12:30pm to 2:00pm. (I am in and out of my office frequently during office hours so please let me know if you will be stopping by).

Office: Lincoln Park Student Center 332 (Tuesdays) and CDM 616 (All other days).

ndewitt@cdm.depaul.edu

Prerequisites: DC 101 or DC 201

Course Management System: D2L.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course examines the storytelling techniques necessary to write an hour long television dramatic series with an emphasis on characterization and structure. Students will write an original pilot episode for a one-hour television drama. Students will study pilots to learn how they work, come up with a concept and pitch for their own Television Show, create Character Biographies for the show's principal characters, then complete a Beat Sheet, Outline and eventually a First Draft of the Pilot for their Television Show.

This class will, as closely as possible, mirror the real world dynamic between Writer and Development Executive with the Student in the role of Writer and the Instructor in the role of Development Executive, minus the contradictory notes and creativity-crippling fear of losing his job.

The instructor will mentor the students to ensure he brings out the voice of the student writer. At the same time, he'll monitor the students' writing to make sure the voices of the characters are clear, the plot moves along with escalating tension, the dialogue and themes ring true and the work is technically, structurally and grammatically correct and properly formatted. We write like professionals in this class.

A lot of this course will be Workshop format. We'll be doing our best to duplicate the atmosphere of a Writer's Room. As with a real writing staff, the class will have the opportunity to offer constructive criticism of each other's work. They will also participate in group rewrites, where they will be expected to help improve the work of their classmates, both in terms of shaping concept but also honing story and tightening scenes. A portion of each student's script will be read aloud at least once during the course in the equivalent of a "Table Read." Polite discourse is expected at all times.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

In this course, students are expected to complete a draft of a script for an ORIGINAL one-hour dramatic pilot (55-65 pages).

REQUIREMENTS:

Actively participate in class discussions, read and critique your own and fellow students' work, complete all homework assignments. ***Strict adherence to deadlines is expected.*** (If you miss an assignment or class, you better have a good reason). Attendance is MANDATORY. This is a lot of work to do in 10 weeks. DO NOT FALL BEHIND!

ASSIGNMENTS:

All assignments must be typed and free of grammatical, spelling and punctuation errors. **It's your work, you're responsible for its quality.** All Scenes and Scripts must be in proper Screenwriting format. (Use of screenwriting software such as Final Draft (if your parents will buy it for you) or Celtx (if you're on a budget) is HIGHLY recommended. (www.celtx.com)

All assignments should include your name and the date of the assignment.

A NOTE ABOUT EMAILS:

Sign them please. I have no way of knowing who EskimoPyrite@FartDartsRUs.org is unless he or she signs the email. I'm always happy to answer any questions you might have.

A NOTE ABOUT TALKING 'SMACK':

Writer's are competitive. I'm not going to sit here and pretend we're all at the same skill level and will all get along famously. Nor am I going to pretend I don't know people are going to talk about each other's work, sometimes in derogatory terms. But I don't want to see it. I don't want to hear about it. And it's absolutely forbidden in my classroom. If you feel the need to badmouth someone's work, please do so in PRIVATE. Note: **THE INTERNET IS NOT PRIVATE!** You'd be surprised who stumbles across your Twitter, Facebook or Blog. So let's please be respectful and remember we're all in this to become better writers.

That said, this is a Workshop, not some wimpy poetry retreat. Sometimes in a workshop people lose fingers. That's just how you learn. Be hard on your classmates' writing and respect them when they're hard on yours. We're all in here to get better and you can't do that without a little constructive criticism. But cruelty and rudeness will not be tolerated. **Ideally, by the end of this course you'll be observant and analytical enough to never make a critique unless it's also accompanied by a suggested fix.**

LASTLY:

By and large, you may say anything in this class, except one phrase. "You didn't get what I was going for." This phrase is the hallmark of young, defensive artists across all media and it's usually the first phrase they utter upon hearing criticism and suffering the pangs of an injured ego. However, it is a nonsense expression, demonstrating a lack of understanding of the relationship between writer and reader. If your work is muddled, vague or otherwise ineffective it is not the reader's responsibility to 'get it,' it is your responsibility to improve your writing. In writing, onus of clarity is on the creator, not the beholder. If I didn't get what you were going for it is because you did not take me there. When feedback comes, don't get defensive. Let your ego go, listen to what's being said, consider new approaches. **The first step to improving your writing is to take ownership of its shortcomings.**

GRADING:

Pilot Breakdowns: 10%

Show Pitch: 5%

Character Biographies: 5%

Character Biographies and Story Document (Beat Sheet): 10%

Revised CBSD: 10%

Outline: 15%

Final Script: 25% (Final)

Class Participation: 20% (Class participation encompasses not only attendance but also your active involvement in discussions and completion of weekly writing 'checkpoints' throughout the second half of the quarter).

THE SCHEDULE:

April 1

Week 1:

Introductions. Who are you and why are you here? What have you written? What TV Shows do you like to watch? Any idea what you might want to write for this course?

Why write a Pilot?

Breakdowns:

Pilot screenings and analysis. How do Pilots work?

House: "Pilot"

Damages: "Get Me a Lawyer"

HOMEWORK: Watch (or read) AT LEAST THREE different pilots, ideally similar to the show you're thinking about writing, and prepare a Breakdown of each as we learned in class. DO NOT WATCH SIX FEET UNDER, we'll be covering it in next week's lecture. Several choices are available on D2L. Due on D2L April 8 by 5:45pm.

EMAIL ndewitt@cdm.depaul.edu by MONDAY, April 6 at 8:00pm with the names of the Pilots you broke down. (I don't need the Breakdowns yet, just what you're watching).

April 8

Week 2:

The Television Industry: What shows have they done? Why the hell are there so many shows about cops, lawyers and doctors? What shows are they doing? How is the industry changing and what does that mean to me as a writer? (Spoiler Alert: it means you have to write a great pilot if you want to write for TV).

What's a TV idea and what's a Movie idea? How are they different? The same? What makes a good TV show? What makes a good pilot? We'll try to reach some consensus as to what tropes all good pilots share.

Screening and Discussion:

Six Feet Under "Pilot"

HOMEWORK: Pitches. Prepare a pitch or a couple of pitches for the ideas you have for dramatic series. How you format this is up to you but your pitch must include: Title, Premise, Genre, Theme, Style/ Tone and Locale. You must include some information about the Principal Characters or Character and some idea of where you see the show going. As we'll discuss, you want to know there are 100 episodes in your idea. DO NOT WORRY about the plot of the Pilot right now. Think about the show as a concept first and foremost. You may be pitching one very detailed show or a couple of less detailed ideas. It's up to you.

Your Pitch Document should not exceed 3 pages. If you have more information, great. Put it in a file somewhere. But keep the pitch document short. You don't sell the steak, you sell the sizzle.

Upload your Pitch Documents to D2L by April 15 at 3:00pm and **in class students should be prepared to pitch your show in class!**

April 15

Week 3:

Show Pitches: Students will pitch their Show ideas and receive feedback from their fellow students and the instructor. Online Students' Pitch Documents will be read aloud and feedback will be given.

PITCHERS: Be prepared to TAKE NOTES while we discuss your idea. You will not remember everything, so write it down. Basically, it's gonna work like this: you pitch your show then shut up and listen. This is why it's okay to give online students feedback even though they aren't in class: your primary job here is to hear.

ONLINE STUDENTS: If you have questions about in-class notes, email the instructor and we'll figure out how to get them answered. **You are expected to provide written feedback on all projects. As an online student, you don't have to come to class, but you are required to participate. This will be measured in your written notes, emailed to the writer. A class list with emails for everyone will be distributed.**

Screening and Discussion:
The Americans "Pilot"

HOMEWORK: Character Biographies. Write one to three paragraph biographies for each of the main characters of your pilot. Focus on Point of View, Characterization, Likability, Relationship to Other Characters, Want, Need and Life Dream. Upload your Character Bios to D2L by Sunday, April 19 at 5:00pm. **You will then receive an email from me containing everyone's Character Biographies. READ THEM ALL and be prepared to discuss on Wednesday. Online Students, email notes to writers by THURSDAY, making sure to CC the Professor.**

April 22

Week 4:

Characters. We will go over everyone's character bios and discuss what's working, what may need work and any other thoughts we have.

Story. We'll discuss story structure as it applies to one hour dramas as we begin to work with your characters to tell the story of your pilot.

HOMEWORK: Now that you have gotten feedback from your peers, it's time to expand the idea and it's characters. For this week, shorten the Character Biographies for your Principal Characters to about one paragraph containing THE MOST important things about that character. These need not be elaborate, intensive psychological life studies but they need to be enough to give us the sense of the kind of person (or robot, or dog, or monster) your character is. (Re-examine the character bios you did for your Breakdowns. This document should look like that).

Furthermore, write up the story you're considering for the Pilot episode. This should be a bulleted list of events or Beat Sheet. (Again, see the Breakdowns for an example of how this should look). This document is called the Character Biographies and Story Document (CBSD) and it should look like the Breakdown you did of an existing show. The only difference is this document is about your show. **MAKE SURE your Beat Sheet includes the Act Breaks. We will be talking about the importance of act breaks at length. The CBSD should not exceed 5 pages. Upload your Character Biographies and Story Document to D2L by Sunday, April 26 at 5:00pm. You will then receive an email from me containing everyone's CBSDs. READ THEM ALL and be prepared to discuss on Wednesday. Online Students, email notes to writers by THURSDAY, making sure to CC the Professor.**

April 29:

Week 5:

Character Biographies and Story Documents. Discuss Character Biographies and Story Documents. What's working? What needs work? Are these characters interesting, compelling and deep enough to be on TV? How can we make the story stronger, more character driven?

Screening and Discussion:

Breaking Bad "Pilot"

Page One Entertainment Writer's Conference is Saturday, May 2.

HOMEWORK: Revised CBSD. Incorporating class and instructor feedback, revise your CBSD, focusing on sharpening the story, raising the stakes and amping up the tension. It is expected at this point you will make significant changes to your story or characters prior to taking the next steps. Think critically and be flexible. Upload your revised CBSD to D2L by Sunday, May 3 at 5:00pm. **You will then receive an email from me containing everyone's Revised CBSDs. READ THEM ALL and be prepared to discuss on Wednesday. Online Students, email notes to writers by THURSDAY, making sure to CC the Professor.**

May 6:

Week 6:

Revised Character Biographies and Story Documents. Discuss Revised Character Biographies and Story Documents. What's working? What needs work? Are these characters interesting, compelling and deep enough to be on TV? How can we make the story stronger, more character driven?

Outlining. Formatting.

Groups will be assigned. For the second half of class, we'll be broken up into groups, just to make the work-flow run a little smoother for everyone. Everyone will read everything, but with groups, there will be less to read each week.

Screening and Discussion:

TBD. (Maybe our first guest).

HOMEWORK: Story Outlines, Group 1. Using the Revised Character Biography and Story Document feedback, students will expand their Pilot Narrative and complete their STORY OUTLINES.

(Formatting will be discussed). Outlines are to be uploaded to D2L by Sunday, May 10 at 5:00pm.

You will then receive an email from me containing Group 1's Outlines. READ THEM ALL and be prepared to discuss on Wednesday. Online Students, email notes to writers by THURSDAY, making sure to CC the Professor.

May 13:

Week 7:

Story Outlines. Discussion and feedback of Story Outlines from Group 1.

Script Formatting.

Screening and Discussion:

TBD. (Maybe a guest)

HOMEWORK: Story Outlines, Group 2. Using the Revised Character Biography and Story Document feedback, students will expand their Pilot Narrative and complete their STORY OUTLINES.

(Formatting will be discussed). Outlines are to be uploaded to D2L by Sunday, May 17 at 5:00pm.

You will then receive an email from me containing Group 2's Outlines. READ THEM ALL and be prepared to discuss on Wednesday. Online Students, email notes to writers by THURSDAY, making sure to CC the Professor.

May 20:

Week 8:

Story Outlines. Discussion and feedback of Story Outlines from Group 1.

Screening and Discussion:

TBD. (Maybe a guest)

HOMEWORK: Group 1. Go to script! Upload your Teaser and Act One (about first 15-20 pages) to D2L by Wednesday, May 27 at 3:00pm.

May 27:

Week 9:

Table Read.

Teasers and Act Ones. We will read Group 1's pages aloud in class and discuss.

ONLINE STUDENTS: watch the lecture and email notes to those students whose work we read in class, making sure to cc the professor.

HOMEWORK: Group 1. Go to script! Upload your Teaser and Act One (about first 15-20 pages) to D2L by Wednesday, June 3 at 3:00pm.

June 3:

Week 10:

Table Read.

Teasers and Act Ones. We will read Group 2's pages aloud in class and discuss.

ONLINE STUDENTS: watch the lecture and email notes to those students whose work we read in class, making sure to cc the professor.

FINAL EXAM:

Your completed PILOT SCRIPT (up to 65 pages, NO LONGER). You will be expected to incorporate the feedback and notes given by the instructor and class into your Pilot Script. This feedback may change your show dramatically.

DUE ONE D2L: 9:00pm SHARP on June 10, 2015.

SCHOOL POLICIES:

Online Instructor Evaluation

Evaluations are a way for students to provide valuable feedback regarding their instructor and the course. Detailed feedback will enable the instructor to continuously tailor teaching methods and course content to meet the learning goals of the course and the academic needs of the students. They are a

requirement of the course and are key to continue to provide you with the highest quality of teaching. The evaluations are anonymous; the instructor and administration do not track who entered what responses. A program is used to check if the student completed the evaluations, but the evaluation is completely separate from the student's identity. Since 100% participation is our goal, students are sent periodic reminders over two weeks. Students do not receive reminders once they complete the evaluation. Students complete the evaluation 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. Students should be sure their email listed under "demographic information" at [CampusConnect](#) is correct.

Academic Integrity Policy

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

Plagiarism

The university and school policy on plagiarism can be summarized as follows: Students in this course should be aware of the strong sanctions that can be imposed against someone guilty of plagiarism. If proven, a charge of plagiarism could result in an automatic F in the course and possible expulsion. The strongest of sanctions will be imposed on anyone who submits as his/her own work any assignment which has been prepared by someone else. If you have any questions or doubts about what plagiarism entails or how to properly acknowledge source materials be sure to consult the instructor.

Incomplete

An incomplete grade is given only for an exceptional reason such as a death in the family, a serious illness, etc. Any such reason must be documented. Any incomplete request must be made at least two weeks before the final, and approved by the Dean of the College of Computing and Digital Media. Any consequences resulting from a poor grade for the course will not be considered as valid reasons for such a request.

Resources for Students with Disabilities

Students who feel they may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact the instructor privately to discuss their specific needs. All discussions will remain confidential. To ensure that you receive the most appropriate accommodation based on your needs, contact the instructor as early as possible in the quarter (preferably within the first week of class), and make sure that you have contacted either the PLuS Program (for LD, AD/HD) or The Office for Students with Disabilities (for all other disabilities) at:

Student Center, LPC, Suite #370 Phone number: (773)325.1677 Fax: (773)325.3720 TTY: (773)325.7296