

Course Proposal:  
Wesleyan University  
Graduate Liberal Studies Program

Writing For Television: Sitcoms,  
Episodic Dramas and Televisual  
Storytelling  
Summer 2018



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## **Course Description:**

A successful television series, whether situation comedy or episodic drama, depends upon well-written and finely honed scripts. While there are many similarities between writing for film and writing for television, there are marked and pronounced differences; where films are self-contained, television is episodic, long running and dependent upon a dynamic between rigid structure and in-depth characterization. This course will introduce students to the process, craft and art of writing for television including: the principles of episodic narrative, the unique attributes and aspects of televisual storytelling, the development of franchises and long form storytelling, the exploration of character and character arcs, expectations of genre, the mechanics of script formatting and the collaborative process of television writing. Students will develop the ability to analyze and critically assess narrative structure, characterization and the use of beats in television scripts. The course will provide students the skills and opportunity to complete a Pilot for a sitcom or episodic drama.

## **Course Objectives:**

1. Students will gain a greater understanding of the role of the writer and the script process in the making of fiction television comedy and drama.
2. Students will explore the unique attributes and elements of television writing.
3. Students will acquire an in-depth knowledge of the process of creating and composing a ‘televisual’ story.
4. Students will learn the typical progression of a script, from idea to development to Pilot.
5. Students will learn how to evaluate and critique the scripted elements of television shows.
6. Students will workshop their creative work, and that of their peers, through simulated “Writer’s Room” exercises.
7. Students will complete a draft of the Pilot Episode of a TV Drama or Sitcom.

## **Course Policies:**

Students are expected to come to class prepared, having completed the writing assignments, readings and ready to participate actively. As the majority of the course meetings will be comprised of critiquing and performing scripts and creative writing, it is essential that students attend each meeting and provide feedback and input for their colleagues. Participation in discussions is an integral part of the course, as is the ability to assist one another in their individual creative process. Even if you attend

every class meeting, if you do not contribute, you cannot receive a class participation grade higher than **B**.

Thus, the policy regarding attendance is both clear and strict. More than **three** absences will likely jeopardize your ability to pass the class. If you miss **three** classes, the **highest** participation grade you can receive is a **C**. Students who miss more than **five** classes will be asked to withdraw from the course or will receive a class participation grade of **F**. Please be **on time!** Habitual lateness will impact your class participation grade, as each **three** instances of lateness to section will be counted as an absence.

Screenings are an integral component of the course and students are required to watch the titles on the syllabus before class meets, even if they have seen them in the past. *The instructor reserves the right to change the screenings without prior notice.* **Students are expected to have access to Netflix, Hulu Plus, Amazon Instant Video or another streaming service.** Due to time constraints it will be difficult, at times, to screen entire television episodes during class meetings. When directed by the instructor, students are **required** to complete viewing of episodes on their own, and to finish them in a timely fashion.

Written assignments must be completed as scheduled. Late work will **not** be accepted, except in cases of documented medical or family emergency. Make-up assignments will only be accepted at the discretion of the instructor. Students are required to notify the instructor if circumstances will not permit the timely completion of course work. **Please be advised that the instructor strongly discourages Incompletes and they are granted only in the most extreme instances.**

## **Reading Assignments:**

The reading load for this course is quite heavy, though the number of reading assignments will vary from session to session. Even though lectures may not draw on the reading directly, it is imperative that you complete the readings in a timely manner. The variety and range of readings are deliberately designed to enhance your understanding of the television writing process and the topic of each class session. Readings due for a given session are to be done *before* the class meets.

## **Required Texts:**

- Douglas, Pamela *Writing The TV Drama Series: Third Edition* New York: Michael Wiese, 2011.
- Goldberg, Lee and William Rabkin *Successful Television Writing* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2003.
- Seinfeld, Jerry and Larry David *The Seinfeld Scripts: The First and Second Seasons* New York: IT Books, 1998.
- Smith, Evan *Writing Television Sitcoms: Revised and Expanded Edition* New York: Tarcher Perigee, 2009.
- Weiner, Matthew *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes: The Mad Men Pilot* simplyscripts.com, 2006.

## **Recommended Texts:**

- McKee, Robert *Story: Substance, Structure Style and The Principles of Screenwriting* New York: Harper Collins, 1997.
- Field, Syd *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting: Revised Edition* New York: Delta Publications, 2005

## **Recommended Software:**

Though conventional word processing software programs are acceptable for producing teleplays, it is strongly suggested that students purchase either *Final Draft 10: Educational Version* or *Fade In*. Discounted Electronic versions of the software package are available for matriculated students through many educational software providers.

## **Written Requirements:**

The goal of the course is for students to complete a script for a pilot television episode, either sitcom or drama. The written assignments, whether creative or analytical, are designed to facilitate this process.

The writing assignments will include the following:

1. Television Script Writing Formatting Exercise.
2. One paragraph written “pitch” for your proposed Pilot.
3. One-page synopsis for your proposed Pilot.
4. Three page backstory for your main characters.
5. An Outline/Breakdown of the narrative structure of your Pilot.
6. A Beat Sheet for your Pilot, with Log Lines.
7. Analytic Essay: A Discussion of the Narrative Structure and Characters of the Pilot Episode of the Student’s Favorite TV Show.
8. A completed Pilot Script.

## **Grading Policies:**

20% Attendance, Participation.

15% Analytic Essay.

30% Screenplay Development Exercises.

35% Completed Script.

All written work must be uploaded to the course Moodle site by the time the course meets on the date they are due. Students must **also** submit their writing in person.

## **Plagiarism:**

There are few academic matters more serious than plagiarism. Any written work for a college course must be wholly original, or it needs to be cited. If you take any idea from an outside source, whether it is a website, book or any media form, you **must** indicate where you obtained that information.

**Copying anything off of the Internet without noting the source is considered plagiarism!** If you are unclear on what constitutes plagiarism, please consult the instructor before submitting your work. **Do not assume something is common knowledge** unless it would be blatantly obvious to anyone with even a passing knowledge of the subject. For instance, that Matt Groening created *The Simpsons* is widely known by people even if they have never seen the show; in contrast, an interpretation of the series, including individual episodes, or their production background, is not common knowledge. **Copying materials from website and books without noting where it can be found and verified by another individual is considered plagiarism; it is not research!**

## **Course Schedule:**

Session One:

### **Introduction: The Art of Televisual Comedy and Drama**

Screening (Excerpts):

*Seinfeld Pilot: The Seinfeld Chronicles* (L. David & J. Seinfeld, 1989).

\*\*\*Please Note: Read *Seinfeld Script: The Seinfeld Chronicles* BEFORE class meets\*\*\*

Session Two:

### **The Franchise: Characters, Ensemble Casts, Surrogate Families and Nutty Neighbors**

Screening (Excerpts):

*Scrubs Pilot: My First Day* (B. Lawrence, 2001)

Reading:

1. E. Smith *Writing Television Sitcoms*, pp. 1 – 47.
2. L. Goldberg & W. Rabkin *Successful Television Writing*, Chapters 1, 2 & 3.

**Written Assignment Due: Script Formatting Exercise.**

Session Three

### **From Development To Shooting Script: Pitches, Ideas and Brainstorms**

Screening:

*Mad Men Pilot: Smoke Gets In Your Eyes* (M. Weiner, 2007)

Readings:

1. P. Douglas *Writing The TV Drama Series*, Chapter 1.
2. Goldberg & Rabkin, *Successful TV Writing* Chapters 4, 5 & 8.
3. Weiner, Matthew *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes: Mad Men Pilot*

**Written Assignment Due: One Paragraph Show Pitch.**

Session Four

### **Plotting and Hitting Beats: Narrative Structure, Conflicts and Resolutions.**

Screening (Excerpts):

*The X-Files: Jose Chung's 'From Outer Space'* (D. Morgan, 1996)

Readings:

1. Douglas *Writing The TV Drama*, Chapter 2.
2. Goldberg & Rabkin, *Successful TV Writing* Chapters 6, 7 & 9.

**Written Assignments Due: Pilot Synopsis and First Five Pages of your Pilot.**

Session Five:

**Writing Episodically: Long Form Storytelling**

Screening (Excerpts):

*Twin Peaks Pilot: Northwest Passage* (M. Frost & D. Lynch, 1990)

Readings:

1. Douglas *Writing The TV Drama*, Chapter 3.
2. Goldberg & Rabkin, *Successful TV Writing* Chapters 10 & 11.
3. Smith, *Writing TV Sitcoms*, pp. 47 – 77.

**Written Assignment Due: Main Character(s) Backstory.**

Session Six:

**From Bare Bones To Fleshed Out: Outlining The Action**

Screening (Excerpts):

*Modern Family Pilot* (S. Levitan & C. Lloyd, 2009)

Readings:

1. Smith, *Writing TV Sitcoms*, pp. 77 – 115.

**Written Assignments Due: Beat Sheet For Your Pilot.  
Next Five Pages of your Pilot.**

Session Seven:

**Witty Banter and Ideal Chatter: Dialogue Is Action**

Screening (Excerpts):

*Cheers Pilot: Give Me A Ring Sometime* (G. & L. Charles, 1982)

Readings:

1. Smith, *Writing TV Sitcoms*, pp. 115 – 142.

**Written Assignments Due: An Outline/Story Breakdown.**

Session Eight:

**Inside The Writer's Room: How TV Scripts Really Get Made**

Screening (Excerpts):

*Medium Pilot* (G. Gordon Caron, 2005)

Readings:

1. Douglas *Writing The TV Drama*, Chapter 4.

**Written Assignments Due: Next Five Pages of your Pilot.**

Session Nine:

**The Long Haul: Building the Total Franchise.**

Screening (Excerpts):

*Law & Order: S.V.U. Pilot: Payback* (D. Wolff, 1999)

Readings:

1. Goldberg & Rabkin, *Successful TV Writing*, Chapters 12, 13 & 14.

**Written Assignments Due: Analytic Critique of the Script of a Television Pilot of the Student's Choosing.**

Session Ten:

**Meaning, Creativity and Thinking Inside/Outside The Big Box.**

Screening (Excerpts):

*M\*A\*S\*H Pilot* (L. Gelbart, 1972)

Readings:

1. Goldberg & Rabkin, *Successful TV Writing*, Chapters 15, 16 & 18.

**Written Assignment Due: Completed Pilot.**